



# CONQUERING FEAR

LIVING BOLDLY IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

HAROLD S. KUSHNER


A K N O P F  B O O K



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A KNOPF  BOOK

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*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

*When Children Ask About God*

*Commanded to Live*

HAROLD S. KUSHNER

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# *Conquering Fear*



*Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*



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What we choose, changes us.

What we love, transforms us.

JAN L. RICHARDSON

Courage is not the absence of fear but the mastery of fear.

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MARK TWAIN

## First Words

- 1 The Eleventh Commandment: Don't Be Afraid
- 2 The Terror That Comes in the Darkness: The Fear of Terrorism
- 3 God Was Not in the Hurricane: The Fear of Natural Disaster
- 4 Suddenly Nothing Is the Same: The Fear of Rapid Change
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- 8 The World Is a Narrow Bridge: The Fear of Death
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## FIRST WORDS

This is my twelfth book. For all the others, I would start with an idea, present it to my publisher, and, if he liked it, proceed to write. For this one, my editor at Alfred A. Knopf, Jonathan Segal, came to me with an idea. He sensed that a lot of people were scared of a lot of things and it was draining the joy from their lives. Could I write a book that would help them? This book is the result of his suggestion; I hope it lives up to the vision he had.

In addition to Jonathan's astute guidance, I have benefited once again from the advice of my longtime editor, James H. Silberman, a revered name in the publishing industry, and the input of my agent and literary matchmaker, Peter Ginsberg of Curtis Brown Ltd. As in all my books, I am grateful to my wife, Suzette, for encouraging me when the writing was going well and for putting up with me when it was going less well. I have dedicated this book, a book about courage, to our daughter, Ariel, in tribute to the courage she has shown on so many occasions of her life.

I am constantly aware of what a privilege it is to have a book published in the expectation that thousands of people will read it and that their lives will be enhanced by it. I can think of few things in life more gratifying than the knowledge that my books have eased people's fears, assuaged their pain, and brightened their tomorrow. I remain deeply grateful to all of my readers for taking my words seriously and making my ideas part of their lives.

HAROLD S. KUSHNER

Natick, Massachusetts

October 2008



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## *The Eleventh Commandment*

DON'T BE AFRAID

They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid.

MICAH 4:4

**B**efore I could write a book about what people today are afraid of and how they might deal with their fears, I had to write first about what frightens me. Only then would I be able to understand the fears of others. Fears can range from mild concern (Did I remember to turn off the oven?) to serious worry (She was due home at ten; it's midnight and she's not home yet!) to sheer panic (My brakes aren't working! The man has a knife!). I find myself worrying more about something happening to people I love than about something happening to me. I worry that they are vulnerable to serious illness, accidents, crime, natural disaster. To love someone is to make yourself a hostage to fortune, aware of all the terrible things that can happen to him or her. Whenever I read of a violent crime against a woman or child, a fatal automobile accident, a young person drowning, the rational side of my brain reassures me that it makes the news only because it is so rare, but my emotional side keeps saying, What if it had been someone close to me? (Even as parents fear for the well-being of their children, children's primal fear is that something will happen to one of their parents. I was once preparing a thirteen-year-old boy for his bar mitzvah ceremony, and I asked him if there was anything he was scared of. I was thinking of his performance at the synagogue service, but he spoke instead of his fear that one of his parents would die while he still needed him or her.) It startles me to realize that my grandson is only a few years away from being eligible for military service and might have to risk his life in a war. I worry about my grandchildren having to cope with the dangers and challenges of adolescence in a much more complicated world than either I or their mother grew up in. I worry about another attack on an American city, like the one on September 11, 2001, with heavy loss of life. I worry in the knowledge that I and the people around me can do everything right and still experience misfortune. We can be careful about what we eat and how much we exercise and still fall victim to a genetic time bomb hidden in our DNA. We can drive carefully and still be in the path of a careless driver. We can work hard at our jobs and save for our retirement, only to have events beyond our control force our employer to terminate our job or market events erode our savings. On those infrequent occasions when I have a bad dream, it is always the same one. I am trying to get somewhere where people are expecting me, and I can't get there. The dream speaks to my sense of helplessness in the face of forces I can't control and my fear of disappointing people who are counting on me.

I worry about losing those things that give meaning and pleasure to my life, the ability to read and to write, to give birth to another book or craft a meaningful sermon, the ability to follow the news and crack a joke about contemporary politics, the ability to recognize people I care about and remember where I know them from. In my rabbinic experience, I have seen too many people who were so sharp and insightful when I met them, only to have those qualities taken from them.

I worry about our planet becoming less livable, about our running out of places to live, water to drink, and even clean air to breathe. Sometimes I worry that I will live so long that I will come to see terrible things happening and be powerless to do anything about them, a worry more fearsome than anything we have ever seen or an economic collapse even greater than the one we have just seen, one that will further erode people's savings, and sometimes I worry that I won't live long enough to see some things I look forward to. And most of all, I worry that all this worrying makes my life less enjoyable than it ought to be.

Columnist Liat Collins has written in *The Jerusalem Post*, "Perhaps deep down my greatest fear is that if I was to live in fear, I would never get anything done. You don't paint an apartment if you constantly worry about the imminence of earthquakes. You don't stay close to friends if you worry that they are about to be wiped out by war or disease.... If you acted on all the fears concerning children, you'd have to spend so much energy trying to protect them that you wouldn't have time to raise them."

How do I cope with all of these fears? Sometimes I do it by putting them in perspective and realizing they are very unlikely to happen. Sometimes I find some small area over which I do have control—watching my diet, conserving energy, recycling more. Sometimes I simply do what most people do: I just stop thinking about unpleasant outcomes; sometimes I stubbornly believe in an act of faith that God has made a world in which tragedy is real but happy endings heavily outnumber tragic ones. I resolve not to let my fears of what *might* happen prevent me from anticipating with pleasure what I hope will happen.

Some years ago, a movie was made called *Defending Your Life* with Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep. The movie imagines people who die going to heaven, where they are put on trial to evaluate how they lived their lives. Every second of every person's life has been recorded on videotape, and in a heavenly tribunal, a prosecutor and a defense attorney summon up key moments of each person's life from childhood to his or her last days. The novel thesis of the movie is that the purpose of the trial is not to determine if one was virtuous or wicked but whether one had learned to conquer fear. That is seen as the goal of life. If in the course of a person's years, he or she never got over being afraid, then the person is sent back to earth to be reincarnated and given another chance to get it right. If people succeeded in overcoming the tendency to be fearful, they "graduate" to a more refined, and presumably more challenging, level of existence.

If overcoming fear is the first goal of life, the achievement that makes other achievements possible, we don't seem to be doing a very good job of it. People today are deeply frightened. Our lives are clouded over by real fears, exaggerated fears, and imaginary fears. At one level, of course, fear is a good thing. Our ancestors at the dawn of the human species could not have survived had they not been sensitive to danger. Whereas animals are born intuitively knowing what to be afraid of—a baby chick that has never seen a hawk will run for cover if a hawk-shaped shadow passes over it—human beings had to learn to know the difference between animals that could be approached and animals that had to be avoided, between the fire that would cook their meat and the fire that would burn down their shelters.

But as the world changed and grew more complex, it became more difficult to know what to be afraid of. It became harder to distinguish between realistic and unrealistic fears. Were we being prudent or paranoid if we didn't let our children play outdoors when we could not

watch them? Should we stop going to movie theaters for fear of a flu epidemic, a terrorism bomb, or the prospect of being mugged in the parking lot? Is that foreign-looking man at the airport a dangerous alien or just someone on vacation? To make matters worse, local television news broadcasts eager to attract viewers and round-the-clock cable news channels desperate to fill their empty hours on days when nothing else is happening recycle every fire, every political scandal, every case of child abduction or food poisoning, to the point where people believe these occurrences are a lot more frequent than they really are. In the words of Dr. Marc Siegel, author of *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, “Our infectious fears spread faster than any bacteria and ignite a sense of [imminent danger] that far eclipses the reality.” Dr. Siegel goes on to say, “Anthrax is not contagious; fear of anthrax is.”

Marketers and politicians have learned how much easier it is to manipulate people, to get them to do what you want them to, when they are frightened. In the next electoral campaign take note of how much of what a candidate says is a promise of the good things he would do and how much is a warning of the terrible things that will happen if his opponent is elected. Margaret Miles, emeritus professor of historical theology, has written in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, “Human beings have always had much to fear.... But humans have not always lived in societies in which fear was actively cultivated.... Isolated incidents are characterized by trends, and anecdotes are substituted for facts.” She goes on to write, “Fear is hard on bodies. Anxiety is the number one health problem in the country, leading to epidemic depression, alcoholism, eating disorders, and prescription drug addiction.... American society is violent because it is so fearful.” It would seem that we need to add unrealistic fears to the list of things we realistically need to be afraid of.

A recent article in the Science section of *The New York Times* reported that “worrying about terrorism could be taking a toll on the hearts of millions of Americans.... Researchers found that the people who were acutely stressed after the 9/11 attacks and continued to worry about terrorism—about 6 percent of the population—were at least three times more likely [to develop] new heart problems.” That represents more than ten million people nationally. If even a tiny fraction of 1 percent of those ten million were to suffer a fatal heart attack due to that stress, it would mean that more people will have died of fear than died on 9/11.

But how do we learn to overcome fear and live bravely in an admittedly dangerous world? Professor Miles suggests that we learn to “live with our uncertainties rather than cater to them.” We need to rely on the ultimate livability of a world in which bad things can and do happen, but not nearly as often as we might think they do, and we need to know that, when we face our fears, we will not be facing them alone.

Dr. Gregory Berns wrote in *The New York Times*: “Workers’ fear has generalized to the workplace and everything associated with work and money. We are caught in a spiral in which we are so scared of losing our jobs, or our savings, that fear overtakes our brains.... It makes it impossible to concentrate on anything but saving our skin.... Just when we need new ideas most, everyone is seized up in fear.” What can we do about it? Dr. Berns goes on to suggest that “the first order of business ... is to neutralize that system. This means not being a fearmonger ... avoiding people who are overly pessimistic ... tuning out media that fan emotional flames.”

Some years ago, Gavin de Becker wrote a best-selling book called *The Gift of Fear*. He

thesis was that we should be grateful for our innate sense that certain people and certain situations are dangerous, rather than brush off those intuitions as unpleasant. To live completely without fear is to live foolishly and dangerously. We would be emotionally blind and vulnerable to being harmed. But there is another sense in which fear can be a gift. Feeling scared reassures us that we are alive, that we are capable of feeling. Men especially have difficulty acknowledging what they are feeling. Therapists regularly find that when they ask a male client, "What are you feeling right now?" more often than not they will get a blank look in response or else an opinion, "I feel my wife is being very selfish," rather than an emotion, "I feel hurt and abandoned." Anger is perhaps the only emotion the average man can recognize in himself. Fear can break the ice jam and open us up to feel such emotions as hope, relief, and gratitude.

Adolescent boys, so concerned about being judged and evaluated by parents, teachers, and peers, so vulnerable to feelings of shame and embarrassment, are notorious for concealing their emotions. They feel safe only when they can put up a front of imperturbability—"I am a rock, nothing gets to me"—to the point where they may lose touch with the ability to feel at all. I think it's wonderful when a man or boy cries at the end of a sad book or movie (I often do). I take that as a sign of emotional openness. But at the same time, I recognize how hard the average adolescent boy works to avoid crying or to avoid anyone's noticing him cry. I have had dozens of boys tell me that they must be bad people because they loved their grandmother but didn't cry at her funeral. Too often, I read about a teenage boy dying in a driving or swimming accident because he had to prove to his friends (and to himself) that he wasn't afraid when any sensible person would have been. Maybe the occasional scary movie or ghost story around a campfire can be an experience in feeling scared and realizing that it is normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

Why, in fact, do people pay to watch scary movies? Why do we read thrillers in which the hero or heroine is in constant danger? Why do we enjoy tales of the uncanny and the supernatural? I think the answer in part is the reassuring feeling we come away with when the monster has been destroyed or the mad slasher has been brought to justice. We can then put the book down or leave the theater confirmed in our faith that life can be scary but order is restored in the end. Some years ago, I was flying from Boston to Los Angeles. When the plane landed, I had six pages left in the thriller I had taken along to read, and while the other passengers deplaned, I remained in my seat, unwilling to close the book until I knew that the hero (whom I had never heard of before I picked up the book and who was in any event a fictional character) survived his showdown with the villain. I can sympathize with the millions of readers who could hardly wait to find out whether Harry Potter would vanquish his archenemy, Lord Voldemort. Having been exposed to the reality of the power of evil (even if the characters in the book were not real), those readers needed to know that virtue would triumph. Their concerns (and mine) are not that different from those of the ancient Babylonians, whose New Year's festival featured a ceremonial battle between their god and the monster of chaos, a struggle whose outcome was as predetermined as a professional wrestling match but nonetheless permitted the audience to face the new year with confidence.

In sum, a small dose of fear keeps us alert and alive, but an overdose can leave us perpetually tense, emotionally closed, and paralyzed to the point of inaction. If we could talk

a pill to banish fear, or if we could have a small part of our brain removed so that we would never feel afraid, it would be a serious mistake. Our goal should not be the total absence of fear but the mastery of fear, being the master of our emotions rather than their slave. Our goal should be to recognize legitimate fears, dismiss exaggerated fears, and not let fear keep us from doing the things we yearn to do.

Sometimes our unrealistic fears are nourished by too much information. But sometimes our fears are nourished by too little information. If we knew more about what was happening and what the true extent of the danger was, we might fear it less. We might be able to see ourselves and our circumstances more realistically.

Why are we afraid of things that in reality have little power to harm us? I have read of people who are so frightened by a thunder and lightning storm that they light a cigarette to calm their nerves. What are the chances of their being struck by lightning (assuming that they are indoors and not walking on a golf course wearing a suit of armor) compared to the harm they do themselves by smoking?

Professor Melvin Konner puts it this way: "We drink, we drive without our seat belts and light up another cigarette ... and then we cancel the trip to Europe on the one-in-a-million chance of an Arab terrorist attack."

I have read numerous articles meant to help parents deal with their children's fears. Many of them distinguish between realistic and unrealistic fears. To me, there are no unrealistic fears. If your young child is scared of monsters under his bed, the monsters may not be real but the fear is real. There is something he is afraid of, and it takes the shape of imaginary monsters. The wise parent deals with those fears not by trying to persuade him that there are no such things as monsters but by leaving a night-light on in or just outside the bedroom so that the darkness is less than total. To a child, the world is an intimidating place filled with knives too sharp for him to play with and streets too dangerous for him to cross. It is a world of lurking dangers. No wonder he imagines the darkness to be populated by monsters. But introduce the tiniest bit of light into a dark room and as soon as the darkness is no longer total, its power to frighten is diminished.

My life as an author and lecturer, and the fact that our daughter and grandchildren until recently lived in another state, oblige me to get on an airplane several times a month. I know that bad things can happen on airplanes, but I set my not entirely unreasonable fear alongside my knowledge of how rare such incidents are and how statistically safe air travel is. In the light of those facts, I continue to fly, aware of my vulnerability but not intimidated by it, not paralyzed to the point of inaction.

(I once rushed to catch a flight from Atlanta to New York and found myself in the last seat in the last row of the plane, next to a well-dressed couple. We struck up a conversation, and they told me they were on their way to New York to attend a fund-raising dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria at which the guests of honor would be the king and queen of Thailand. I commented that I would expect most people on their way to dine with royalty to be seated in first class, not in the back of the coach section. The husband replied, "My wife is more comfortable in the last row. She's read about lots of planes that have crashed, but she's never read of a plane being rear-ended.")

But the light we turn to in an effort to dispel fear is more than just a quest for information.

Since many of the fears that trouble us are irrational, they are not likely to be banished by rational considerations. I often suspect that when a person holds on to an irrational fear and cannot be talked out of it by citing facts, that fear is a cover for some other, deeper fear that he or she is unwilling or unable to put into words or afraid of having to do something about.

Some years ago, I met with a woman in my congregation who was terrified every time she went shopping with her young children. She had read a newspaper account of a child being kidnapped and murdered in a crowded mall. She had read a best-selling novel about a department store child snatching, and she was paralyzed with the fear that the same thing would happen to her family. I pointed out to her how statistically rare such crimes were. She reminded her that they make the news precisely because they are so rare and startling. She looked at me and said, "Rabbi, I know you're right. I've told myself the same things. But I'm still afraid. I know it's crazy. I know millions of people go shopping with young children every day and nothing happens, but that's how I feel and I can't help it." I recommended that she see a therapist, who discovered after two sessions that the woman was haunted by the idea that she was an inadequate mother. Her own mother was constantly criticizing her for the way she raised her children, blaming her every time one of them got sick or was injured. That was what planted the thought in her mind that she would not be able to keep her children safe in a crowd. Once the focus shifted from the fear of a kidnapping to her problem with a nagging mother, it didn't totally solve her problem, but it did free her to go shopping like a normal person. Shedding light on her anxiety made it seem more manageable and less frightening.

One of the components of fear that makes it such a destructive emotion is the sense of helplessness it engenders. We are sensitive to the difference between these two statements:

Something terrible is likely to happen.

Something terrible is likely to happen and there is nothing you can do about it.

The second statement is a lot more upsetting than the first. A sense of helplessness or powerlessness intensifies the fear, and people will do all sorts of things, rational or irrational, to lessen that sense. For example, whenever there is an airplane accident with significant loss of life, thousands of people who had planned to fly somewhere decide to drive there instead, despite the fact that the chances of being in a serious automobile accident are far higher than the chances of being in a plane crash. They do it because when you are a passenger in an airplane, you are close to helpless in an emergency. You have virtually no control over what happens. But in your own car, you have a sense of being in control. Similarly, some people diagnosed with a life-threatening illness will do almost anything—travel to consult doctors in distant cities or foreign countries, experiment with bizarre diets—rather than stay home and follow the treatment recommended by their own physician. Doing something, however unproven or irrational, even something potentially harmful, is their way of saying that they are not giving up. They are taking charge of their own fate.

Because people rarely feel as totally out of control as when they are hospitalized, nurses have learned that patients will often feel less fearful and be more cooperative if they are given a measure, however small, of control over what happens to them. It may be something as trivial as asking, "Would you like your medications at eleven thirty or eleven forty-five?"

or “Would you like to have the sleeping pill first or regular medication first?” But it helps.

Several years ago, I was hospitalized over the Fourth of July weekend with a severe leg infection that did not respond to even the most powerful antibiotics. The doctors, many of them recent medical school graduates who had begun their careers on July 1 and for whom I was one of their first patients, were stumped, and I in turn sensed their frustration, which did little to alleviate my own sense of helplessness as I lay there in pain. Accustomed as I was to being a person who solved other people’s problems, it was frustrating to be told that there was nothing I could do to help myself get better. Anyone who has been hospitalized will remember those long nights and long stretches of daytime when nothing is happening, and how helpless, how utterly abandoned one feels at a time like that. Anyone whose ailment does not respond to treatment knows the haunting concern, Will I ever feel better? Things improved when they called in the hospital’s top expert on infectious diseases, who ruled out the possibility that it was a deadly flesh-eating bacteria (mercifully, they had not told me they suspected that) and suggested what turned out to be the effective antibiotic. But my gratitude for his intervention coexists in my memory with the recollection of how helplessness felt while I was not getting better.

Prayer is one of the most familiar ways of alleviating the sense of helplessness. People pray in hospitals and doctors’ offices, seeking a favorable test result or a good outcome after treatment. On the weekend following the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and on the weekend following the attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in 2001, churches and synagogues were filled to overflowing with people who didn’t know what else to do with their anxiety and sense of helplessness except to turn to God. They needed to be able to bring their troubled minds and souls to God and ask Him for strength. And they needed to feel that they were doing something with their grief, their fear, their newfound sense of vulnerability rather than helplessly keeping those feelings inside them. More than anything, they needed not to be alone. It enabled clergymen of all faiths to give their people the message, Let us not panic and let us not despair. There is a story that on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967, when Arab nations threatened to overrun and destroy the state of Israel, the head of a yeshiva, a college of Orthodox Talmudic study in Jerusalem, told his students, “This is a time of great danger. Don’t just sit there doing nothing. Recite psalms.”

Dr. Dean Hamer, in his book *The God Gene*, writes about a fishing boat off the coast of Italy in 1587 that was caught in a violent storm and was in danger of sinking. The captain, who had recently visited a chapel presided over by a monk named Francis, prayed to God and to Father Francis to save them. The ship survived the storm, and ever since, St. Francis of Assisi has been the patron saint of travelers. Dr. Hamer acknowledges that we can never know for certain if it was prayer that saved the sailors, but prayer continues to be an attractive option for several reasons. First, stories of survival are told by survivors, so we are more likely to hear about cases in which prayers seem to have been answered than cases in which they were not. Second and more significant, praying can ease one’s sense of helplessness. It can make us feel more hopeful and optimistic, possibly clearing our minds and freeing us to take effective action rather than remaining paralyzed by fear.

If the decision to pray or not to pray in times of danger were a results-based question, many fewer people would pray. So often, even when we pray with total conviction and

sincerity, we don't get what we prayed for. One writer puts praying about a problem in the same category as worrying or complaining about it, a way of letting ourselves feel that we are doing something while in reality we are not affecting the outcome at all. I think that's a too negative a judgment, rooted in his understanding of prayer as a form of begging or bargaining with God. I don't see prayer that way. When I pray, I don't think of myself as asking God to intervene and change things. I pray because invoking God's presence helps me to feel less alone.

A non-Jewish friend once asked me, "Harold, what do Jews pray for?" I answered, "Jewish prayer is less a matter of praying *for*, and more a matter of praying *with* and praying *to*." As the theologian Martin Buber put it, when we pray, we don't ask God for anything. We ask God for God. We invite God into our lives, so that the actions we take will be guided by a sense of God's presence.

When I sit with a seriously ill patient in a hospital and pray with her, I explain that our prayer expresses our hopes for a favorable outcome. But more than that, I want the patient to know that she is ill not because God has rejected her or is punishing her for something. God is on *her* side, not on the side of the illness. God is sending her doctors and nurses, endowing them with skill and sensitivity. And even at night when the room is dark and deserted and she may feel desperately alone, she can call on God to keep her company. Asked by a television interviewer what I thought of an experiment that seemed to show that praying for people in hospitals made no difference, I told her, "God's job is not to make sick people healthy. That's the doctor's job. God's job is to make sick people brave."

Many religions urge people to give money to charity or to perform an act of generosity or communal service to accompany their prayers at a time of uncertainty and high anxiety. I would hope that neither the people who offer that advice nor the people who follow it believe that God can be so easily bribed. There is something else at work here. Years ago, my wife noticed that when I sat down to write in the morning, I would begin by writing a check to some charitable cause. At first, I told her it was just a matter of clearing a letter off my desk, but I came to realize that it was more than that. It was a kind of prayer that my writing would go well, tapping into the generous, compassionate dimension I believe exists in each of us and hoping that my writing would reflect that. No matter how many books I have written or how well they have been received, whenever I begin a new book or a new chapter, I feel intimidated by that blank page in front of me. Do I really have something to say on this topic that people need to hear? In some way that defies rational explanation, making a charitable contribution helps me feel that much more confident about myself.

In much the same way, our biblical ancestors accompanied their prayers with a sacrifice, a lamb, a pigeon, even a cake of flour and oil if that was all they could afford, so that they could feel they were praying as generous people, not as selfish ones.

In a sense, all of our fears—fear of crime, fear of failure and rejection, fear of disaster—are all variations on one basic fear: We are not sure whether our planet is a friendly place, a world we can live in safely. Can we trust Nature? Can we trust other people? Can we trust our own bodies? As Dr. Gordon Livingston has written in his book *Too Soon Old*, "The primary goal of parenting, beyond keeping our children safe and loved, is to convey to them a sense that it is possible to be happy in an uncertain world, to give them hope." But before



we can do that, we have to be able to believe it ourselves.

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There are three strategies people employ for making a dangerous world seem less scary. Some individuals choose the route of denial, insisting that the world is totally just, that under God's providence nothing happens to people that they do not deserve. If those who hold this view read of a man being cheated in a business deal, they can tell themselves that he has only himself to blame for being too greedy or too gullible. If a woman is sexually assaulted, these people can comfort themselves by asserting that she was probably "asking for it" with the way she was dressed, the time of day or night when she was out, or the neighborhood she was walking in. If a city is severely damaged by flood or fire, they can say it is undoubtedly God's rendering righteous judgment on that city as He did to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible. All those in denial can assure themselves that nothing comes into people's lives that they did not invite in. Good people have nothing to fear. If something bad does happen, those in denial can choose to believe that they did something to deserve it rather than that there is disorder or unfairness in God's world.

Sometimes people will call on the notion of karma, borrowed (and usually misunderstood) from Buddhist thought, to explain the misfortunes of ostensibly good people. When a child is born with a severe disability, his life impacted before he ever has the chance to live it well or badly, those who believe in karma can choose to tell themselves that his soul is being punished for its misdeeds in a previous life. I remember a store clerk who saw me with my young son, who suffered from a serious growth disorder, and said to me in all seriousness and in an effort to make sense of what he saw, "He must have been a very vain person in a previous life." Whenever I hear that line of reasoning, I am reminded of the comedian Sam Levenson, who would tell of how his mother went up to his teacher on the first day of school and said to her, "If my boy Sammy misbehaves, hit the kid next to him. He learns by example."

If someone's powers of denial are not strong enough to reconcile the harsh events of the world with the notion of a just God, he or she can go to the other extreme. Such individuals can see the world as a hopeless mess, contaminated by evil people and natural calamities with no divine guardian to help. All people can do is arm themselves against the evil: trust no one; expect the worst; move into a gated community; look out for yourself and your family and advise others to do the same. The trouble with that approach is that human beings were not made to regard all other human beings as potential enemies. We need friends; we need to be able to trust people. Too much vigilance, too much suspicion poisons the soul and shortens our lives. I remember, as a former military chaplain, talking to infantry soldiers about the experience of "walking point," going ahead of the rest of your unit to check if any moving leaf conceals an enemy sniper, if any rock covers a land mine. One can do that for only so long, they told me, before it wears you down and you begin to see everyone and everything as a potential source of danger.

The late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould once proposed an alternative to Darwin's theory of "the survival of the fittest," the idea that Nature has arranged for the strongest and most ruthless to survive and the weakest members of any society to die out. He cited a Russian thinker, Petr Kropotkin, who suggested that Darwin, living in the teeming, congested metropolis of London, would have naturally thought in terms of the necessities of life being

in short supply and people having to struggle to claim their share. But in the steppes of Russia, Kropotkin wrote, survival results not from competition but from cooperation, not from people against other people but from people together against the environment. Animals hunt in packs, and all share in what one has killed. Human beings pool their skills and resources so that each person benefits from things another can do that he finds difficult. The law of Nature, the law of God's natural world, is not the survival of the one who grabs more of life's good things for himself but the survival and prosperity of those who learn to share. Nature may contain a law of the survival of the fittest, yet it defines the fitness that leads to survival not by our readiness to compete but by our willingness to share.

Then there is a third alternative: not to insist that everything is God's righteous judgment and not to insist that everything is a dangerous mess in a world abandoned by God but to acknowledge that the world is a dangerous place and at the same time maintain the faith that God has planted in us the capacity to contend with those dangers and to overcome them. One of the central prayers of the Jewish High Holy Days, when we pray for a year of life and good fortune, enumerates all the terrible things that might happen to us in the coming year: events that must have been all too common for the average person a century or two ago. "Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by drowning, who by weapon and who by wild animal." The prayer then concludes with the line "But prayer and righteous living can lessen the severity of the decree." That is, prayer and good deeds don't keep bad things from happening to you (though your charity and good deeds may keep them from happening to others), but they can make the bad things hurt less. They can lessen the severity of the misfortune, and that assurance may be enough to make the unknown future less frightening.

We distinguish between pain and suffering. Pain is the physical response to what happens to us; suffering is the emotional response, our becoming depressed or feeling hopeless, feeling like a victim because of the pain. As the saying goes, pain is inevitable; suffering is optional. Athletes, surgical patients, and women in childbirth experience severe pain, but if they are confident in their ability to deal with the pain and if they remain mindful of the reward waiting for them at the end of the pain, they need not suffer. Life will probably hurt us all, but if we can just remember that it may not be our choice whether or not to be hurt but it is always our choice whether or not to be afraid of the pain, it will probably hurt less.

More than eighty times in the Bible, God tells people not to be afraid (usually translated as "fear not"). God says it to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Moses. He repeats it four times to His first remarks to Joshua, lest Joshua be overwhelmed by the task of succeeding Moses. He tells each of the prophets not to be afraid of the demands of their role and commands them to tell the people not to be afraid as well. In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly admonishes his disciples not to be afraid, and the angel's first words to Mary are "Do not be afraid."

Why do we need to be told "Don't be afraid" so often? I believe that God realizes how many things there are that frighten us, but He does not want us to live lives dominated by fear. Fearful people cannot be happy. Fearful people cannot be generous, charitable, or forgiving. Fear constricts the soul and keeps us from being as fully human as God would like us to be. In the Bible, virtually the first words spoken by a human being to God are an expression of fear. Responding to God's question, "Where are you?" Adam says, "I heard Your

voice in the garden and I was afraid” (Genesis 3:10).

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God spoke to the generation of Moses, the generation that left Egypt, and gave them the Ten Commandments, forbidding murder, theft, and adultery, enjoining them to respect the truth and honor their parents. But God also spoke to the generations before them and after them and gave them, and us, an Eleventh Commandment: Don't be afraid.

God commands us not to be afraid, not because there is nothing to fear but precisely because the world can be such a frightening place, and God realizes that we can never fulfill our potential as human beings if we are paralyzed by fear. Just as the bans on theft and adultery are not meant to deprive us of pleasure but to make sure that we do not miss out on what it can mean to be a human being in full exercise of our uniquely human gifts of empathy and self-control, just as the injunction to respect our parents is intended to make sure that we do not cut ourselves off from a major source of wisdom, guidance, and love, the Eleventh Commandment, the commandment not to be afraid, is meant to keep us from missing out on many of the blessings of life that are accessible only to those who are able to face their fears, see them clearly, and stare them down. Don't be afraid of being afraid. Our goal should never be the denial of fear but the mastery of fear, the refusal to let fear keep us from living fully and happily.

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## *The Terror That Comes in the Darkness*

THE FEAR OF TERRORISM

You need not fear the terror that comes at night nor the arrow that flies by day.

PSALM 91:5

Every member of my parents' generation remembered for the rest of their lives where they were and what they were doing on December 7, 1941, when they heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I and everyone my age remembers where we were on November 22, 1963, and heard the news of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. And we and our children remember where we were on September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., were attacked. That morning, I was at Boston's Logan International Airport, sitting in an American Airlines jet much like the one that was about to crash into the World Trade Center. I was waiting to fly to Toronto to begin the publicity tour for my new book when the pilot announced that our departure would be delayed briefly as there had been an incident in the air space over New York City. No one thought much of that announcement; delays in departure are not uncommon. Twenty minutes later, a second announcement told us to leave the aircraft and leave the terminal, as the airport would be shutting down. We left the plane and entered the departure lounge, where the television sets that usually broadcast the news had been turned off. At that point, none of us knew what had happened. Like virtually every other passenger I turned on my cell phone and was about to call Toronto and tell them my flight had been canceled when my daughter reached me to make sure I was all right. She had known that I was flying out of Boston and that two planes out of Boston either had been hijacked or had crashed. It was from her that I learned what had happened. I found my way home in a daze, aware only that the United States had been attacked by an unidentified enemy. A beautiful fall day that was to have been the first day of a fulfilling experience for me was suddenly turned into a day of pain, confusion, and emotional turmoil. All I remember of that morning is the contrast between the perfect weather outdoors and the uncertainty inside my head.

September 11 changed everything and yet it changed nothing. We had known that such things happen before they happened to us. We had read newspapers and seen television accounts of terrorist attacks designed to maximize civilian casualties in Israel, in Northern Ireland, in African countries. We were all too familiar with the images of ambulances racing to the scene and of aid workers trying to separate the wounded from the dead, of politicians solemnly denouncing the crime. Why then do we see 9/11 as a day that changed the way we felt about the world, separating recent history into "before" and "after"?

St. Augustine, interpreting the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, explains how they should have known that eating the forbidden fruit was wrong even before they acquired a knowledge of good and evil. He suggests that Adam and Eve already had *theoretical* knowledge of sin, of going against the will of God. That is, they knew that such a concept existed. But by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they acquired a *experiential* knowledge of what it meant to sin. They now knew what it felt like.

In much the same way, before 9/11, we knew about terrorist attacks on civilian populations. But they always happened elsewhere. After 9/11, we lost that innocence. We now knew what it felt like to have our neighbors, our fellow citizens killed in cold blood by terrorist assassins. We had thought that we were invulnerable, protected by oceans to our east and west and friendly neighbors to our north and south. There had been wars involving American casualties, but not since the War of 1812 had Americans been killed on continental American soil by a foreign enemy. The events of 9/11 destroyed that sense of invulnerability. Novelist Deborah Eisenberg, in her book *Twilight of the Superheroes*, writes, “The planes struck, tearing through the curtain of that blue September morning, exposing the dark world that lay right behind it.” And it is that dark world that we have been living in ever since.

After a decent interval when life shut down throughout America so that we could mourn and grieve, I resumed traveling to talk about my new book and inevitably, because I was known as the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, about the events of 9/11. People on the East Coast asked me if I thought that residents of the American heartland were as affected by the attack on New York and Washington as locals were. I found that New Yorkers felt it more personally. They had seen the smoke and found the ashes of the collapsed buildings on their windowsills. Residents of Boston, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and the Washington, D.C., area were more likely to have known someone on one of the planes or in one of the offices that had been destroyed. (I had served on the board of a charitable organization with one of the victims. The funeral for another was held in my synagogue.) But the reverberations of 9/11, the sudden sense of vulnerability, were felt nationwide. A man in Chicago said to me, “It could be my office building next time.” A woman in Kansas City told me, “I don’t feel safe going to a department store.” As I write these lines several years after the event, we are still in the grip of that sense of vulnerability. On one anniversary of the attack, a woman wrote to *The Boston Globe*, “I miss the casualness of waking up and feeling safe.... I am beginning to forget what life was like before the terrorists attacked our country.... But I realize that what I miss most [is] September 11, 2001.”

Terrorist math is simple. Kill one person, frighten a thousand. Kill a few thousand people, terrify an entire population. Terrorism has been defined as the effort “to create fear in a population disproportionate to the actual danger.” The real targets of a terrorist attack are not only the immediate victims but all the people who will be sufficiently intimidated by the attack, to the point where they lose their nerve and change their behavior. You may remember how the D.C. sniper, one man with a rifle (aided by a teenage accomplice), nearly shut down an entire metropolitan area in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia by shooting people at random. People were reluctant to fill their cars with gas because several victims had been shot at filling stations. Terrorism works only when it causes people to sense not just “something terrible has happened” but “something terrible has happened in a place my children and I often go to—office buildings, schools, a shopping mall. I’m not sure how I feel about going to those places anymore.”

What would be a proper response to the threat of terrorism, one that does not deny the reality of the threat but does not let it succeed in breaking our will? Most of what has to be done to prevent future terrorist incidents will have to be done by governments, and there is not that much we can do to further their efforts, which would include better surveillance

prompt analysis and sharing of intelligence, and a readiness to negotiate coupled with the firmness not to make concessions that would only send a message to our enemies that terrorism works. But some of what has to be done to defeat international terrorism lies beyond the capacity of governments. Because the perpetrators of 9/11 and later incidents in Spain, England, Israel, and elsewhere were Muslim extremists, much of the hard work of uprooting terrorism will have to be done within Islam, not by Western societies confronting Islam, and there are some encouraging signs that moderate Muslims are trying to do that. Many Muslim organizations are condemning violence against innocent civilians and are working with Christians and Jews to dispel misconceptions and foster mutual respect and understanding. But there are important things that private citizens like you and me can do as well.

First and foremost, when we come to understand that the intended targets of a terrorist attack are not just the people they kill but the population they are seeking to intimidate, we will realize that, even if we cannot prevent every terrorist incident, we foil the terrorists when we refuse to be intimidated. We can learn from the people of Northern Ireland, Colombia, Israel, and elsewhere that the best response to terrorism is to continue to lead our normal lives.

In the aftermath of 9/11, we have heard calls to keep on doing what we are accustomed to doing, because if we don't, "it will be a victory for terrorism." That mantra has been repeated so often that one magazine printed a cartoon of a child saying to his parents, "If you don't let me stay up to watch *American Idol*, then the terrorists will have won." Nonetheless, that advice is correct. The first and best response to terrorism is not to let our enemies scare us out of doing what we want to do. If they hijack airplanes, we must continue to get on airplanes. If they bomb a subway or a coffee shop, we must continue to ride the subways and patronize the coffee shops. It may be hard to summon up the courage to do these things, but if we don't, we hand our world over to the forces of violence. People do even more difficult things every day. An Israeli man whose daughter had been badly burned in the bombing of a school bus was quoted as saying, "There are worse things than dying, and one of them is to live every hour of every day of your life in fear. We are not going to do that." A Colombian businessman explained why he continued to go to his office every day, even though it meant leaving his home at a different time, in a different car, by a different route every morning and hiring bodyguards to follow him in a second vehicle: "I've invested my whole life in this business. If I let the criminals scare me away from going to work, I let them rob me of my life." Many of us of a certain age remember with admiration the steadfastness of Londoners during the Nazi blitz in World War II. London was bombed every night. Buildings were destroyed, and people were killed. But Londoners huddled in their shelters overnight, and the morning life went on.

The power of a terrorist act, the secret of its effectiveness, lies in its randomness. If any bus, any coffee shop can be the target of a suicide bomber, then no bus, no coffee shop is safe, and so one could argue, we should avoid them all. But in that randomness may lie the ultimate weakness of terrorist intimidation and the key to defeating it. The terrorist wants you to think, If any shopping mall can be a target, then no shopping mall can be guaranteed safe. But why can't we think instead, If there are a hundred thousand shopping malls in America, even if today is the day a terrorist cell plans to bomb a shopping mall, the odds are

a hundred thousand to one against its being the one I'm going to. Statistically, I'm in more danger from other drivers on the way to the mall than I am from a terrorist bomb once I get there.

If terrorists succeed in killing dozens, even hundreds of victims but do not cause the targeted population as a whole to live in fear, they will have failed. Mariane Pearl, whose husband, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, was abducted and murdered by Muslim fanatics, told an interviewer, "Terrorism is a psychological weapon. It stops you from claiming the world as your own. It stops you from relating to other people. It creates fear and hatred. The only way to fight terrorism as a citizen is to deny them those emotions.... The one thing they are not expecting is my happiness. That is true revenge."

Until the day comes when governments and religious authorities work to marginalize the aspiring terrorist, we may have to learn to live with the danger of terrorism the way we have learned to live with the dangers of drunk drivers, urban crime, and exploding gas lines. When these things happen, they are indisputably tragic, causing innocent victims to suffer and the families to grieve, but life goes on.

In time, I believe, we will learn to cope with international terror the way we have learned to cope with serial killers and identity theft, by responding with prudence rather than panic. We minimize the danger of being mugged by avoiding certain neighborhoods, not going out alone at night if we can help it, and being willing to pay taxes to maintain an adequate police force. And even then, we can do everything right and still be a victim. One can be a victim anywhere. But that knowledge does not scare us away from going shopping or to the movies. It is one of the tragedies of life that in every population a certain number of individuals will be violent criminals, abusers, and swindlers. But it would be a greater tragedy if that fact kept us from enjoying life and taught us to regard everyone with suspicion. Similarly, in an age of terrorist threats, we put up with taking our shoes off at the airport and opening the trunks of our cars when we enter a high-rise garage. Israelis years ago became used to having their bags and purses searched when they enter a department store. In these cases, we have chosen to be vigilant but not intimidated.

One of my favorite writers, Dr. Gordon Livingston, in his book *And Never Stop Dancing* shares a story told to him by a patient. In 2003, with memories of 9/11 fresh in many people's minds, his patient was attending a concert of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. At one point, the lights in the hall went out. Many people wondered if Baltimore had been attacked. But "*the orchestra kept playing*. Sitting in the dark, unable to see the conductor or their scores, the musicians played on flawlessly.... The ovation at the end of the piece [was] especially heartfelt." We too, in a time when darkness threatens to envelop us, can do nothing more helpful or more courageous than to ignore the darkness and go on playing.

The attacks on New York and Washington on 9/11 changed the calculus about dealing with terrorists in another way. There had been instances of people hijacking airliners before 9/11 to or from Cuba or in the Middle East, to make a political statement. The standard response was to preserve lives at any cost. Let them have the plane; let them land it safely somewhere, and then we will negotiate, or we will pressure the host country to arrest them. The assumption was that the hijackers had every reason to want to survive, if only to be able to broadcast their grievances to the world. September 11 introduced a new element. The

perpetrators were not interested in being heard or making a statement. They wanted to hurt the United States as badly as possible, even if it meant dying in the act. What made the difference? The principal motivation providing the energy for what they did was no longer political but religious, and that is bad news. People can compromise on political disagreements, but how do you compromise on matters of faith? As long as the conflict in Northern Ireland is about economic inequality and sharing political power, people of goodwill should be able to work something out. But if the dispute one day devolves into a quarrel over the merits of Protestant and Catholic Christianity, how will they ever agree? If the conflict in the Middle East can be confined to where to draw the border between a Jewish state and a Palestinian state, I can imagine people reaching an agreement. But when you have one side brandishing biblical passages about God promising the land to their group and the other side citing the Koran to insist that any territory once controlled by Islam, including not only Israel but Spain and much of Europe and Africa, can never be alienated from Muslim rule, there will be little room for agreement.

Terrorism fueled by religious fanaticism represents a more difficult challenge to Western democracies in part because Western democracies tend to be committed to the free exercise of speech and religion, and their legal representatives are reluctant to take action against mosques that preach jihad or churches that celebrate the bombing of abortion clinics. The effort to dampen the fires of fanaticism will have to come from within the religions themselves. Any religion that aspires to be taken seriously in the twenty-first century will have to proclaim loudly and unequivocally that violence in the name of God is a sin and an act of blasphemy. They will have to explain the bloodshed in the Bible, in the Crusades, and in the formative years of Islam as a relic of a time when people had not yet come to understand that God abhors the murder of the innocent.

The Bible tells us that when King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, “only finished stones cut at a quarry were used, so that no hammer or ax or any iron tool was heard in the Temple while it was being built” (1 Kings 6:7). For Solomon, whose name means “man of peace,” the Temple would be a sanctuary undefiled by the implements that were so often turned into weapons. Violence may sometimes be necessary, but it can never truly be good. It is always a concession to human weakness. Most world religions would like to believe that living in peace is the natural condition of human beings, and conflict arises only as a result of mistakes or bad choices. But some students of human nature have come to suspect that this outlook is more ideal than reality, that conflict is normal and peace is the exception, born of great effort. They see the testosterone-fueled drive of men to keep what they have and even augment it as a survival aid in primitive times, one that we have not outgrown. Philosopher and psychologist William James, in his classic essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” expresses his concern that young men will always be attracted to war as a way of proving their strength and courage to themselves and to others, and he urges society to find a less destructive way of letting them do that. A rabbinic legend imagines Cain and Abel quarreling over who would get the choicest land and the most desirable women, the quarrel ending with Cain killing his brother. I worry about the human condition when in a history of the American Civil War, I read the description of crowds of spectators bringing their picnic baskets to watch the bloody battle of Antietam, and of soldiers singing and whistling as they march off to war as if it were a football game. It frightens me when I see how readily people resort to violence whenever



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