

Hope vs. Fear
Rev. Mark Hayes
May 28, 2006

Reading: from *The Left Hand of God* by Michael Lerner

For the past several thousand years, much of human society has been torn by a struggle between two worldviews or ways of understanding what it is to be human. The one view tells us that we are born into a world in which each person is out for themselves and life is a battle of all against all. Others will dominate you unless you dominate them first. Security for ourselves, our families, our communities, or our nation depends on our ability to get the advantage over them before they get it over us. Fear of the other is common sense, the only possible response a rational person can have in a world where competition is required for survival. I call this the view of cynical realism, and the normal psychological state accompanying it is heightened alert and fear.

The other view tells us that the world is composed of human beings who desire and need loving connection, recognition of who they are from others whom they respect, and joyous celebration of life and consciousness and freedom. According to this view, people are constantly seeking ways to cooperate, and they feel most fulfilled when they are needed by others and can generously provide care and assistance. Our fate is intrinsically bound up with the fate of others, and our own realization as human beings depends upon the fullest realization of the capacities and desires for love of everyone else on the planet. I call this the view of spiritual consciousness, or the unity of all being, and the normal psychological state accompanying it is heightened generosity and hope. . .

When fear prevails, those parts of our cultural heritage – religious texts, for example, or novels and poetry, or social and psychological theories – that validate our fears are deemed the most intellectually sophisticated, while those that embody elements of hope are dismissed as naïve, with little to teach us. Conversely, when hope is in the ascendancy, politicians and theologians, novelists and social theorists who were previously dismissed as unsophisticated because they dared to articulate hope in a time of fear are now seen as visionary thinkers and leaders.

It's rarely the case that someone produces a decisive argument that proves one paradigm or the other. Rather, there is a flow of social energy, a movement of consciousness, both inside each person and in the society as a whole, between our most hopeful and our most fearful inclinations.

Sermon

I have preached to you before about fear. In particular I spoke a couple of years ago about fear and courage. Today I'd like to speak about a slightly different pairing; namely, fear and hope. This topic caught my interest while I was on sabbatical, when I read the book *The Left Hand of God*, from which this morning's reading was taken. The book was written by Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, and organizer of the fledgling Network of Spiritual Progressives, which held its second organizing conference just last week at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC. This is another group working to bring progressive spiritual values into the political and social marketplace.

One of Lerner's theses is that there are two very different ways of looking at and using God and religion, one based on fear, the other based on hope. He talks about the Right Hand of God as the approach rooted in fear. It is steeped in values such as vengeance, militarism, and punishment. What Lerner calls the Left Hand of God is the approach based on hope. It embraces the spiritual values of love, caring, generosity, kindness, nonviolence, peace, and social justice. Lerner further suggests that the pendulum is currently quite a ways toward the right, and that, in fact, our fears are often used and even manipulated in order to generate support for the agenda of those in positions of power.

And so I think it is worth exploring the relationship between fear and hope, and to consider whether there are ways of nudging the pendulum back away from fear and in the direction of greater hope.

Let me begin by recognizing that fear is one of the most fundamental and universal of human emotions. And let me acknowledge that there are legitimate causes of fear all around us. In fact our fears serve in many ways to protect our health and well-being. Our natural fear of fire, of heights, of pain and even death continually keep us from walking into harm's way. Fear can call our attention to potential danger, and give us the opportunity to avoid it.

But beyond the kind of instinctive fright generated by situations of physical danger there is a whole array of other forms of fear. There is worry, which is fear produced by our own worst imaginings. There is the sense of insecurity, prompted by feelings of inadequacy. And there is dread, fear generated by life's fundamental uncertainty. These are the kinds of fear that are fed by much of what we see in the world around us.

Of course, there are many legitimate sources of fear. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and potential wars in Iran and North Korea, threaten massive violence and loss of life, including many innocent civilians, as well as the squandering of precious resources desperately needed for more positive uses. Techniques of torture, apparently sanctioned at the highest levels, and the erosion of civil liberties in the name of security threaten to move us further in the direction of totalitarianism, which used to be considered the enemy. Our nation's spiraling debt threatens to leave our children and theirs unable to dig their way out of the hole we're digging them into. Disregard for environmental health in the pursuit of short-term economic interests threatens to leave those same children and grandchildren a bleak world of disappearing species and potentially catastrophic consequences of global warming. And if all that is not enough to scare you, don't forget the terrorists who are out to get you because you love freedom. So are you afraid yet?

With so many things to be afraid of, shouldn't we act out of our fear? Psychologist Stanley Hibbs acknowledges that the worry and anxiety caused by focusing on the bad things that could happen in the future can serve a purpose if they lead to productive activity. For example, concerns for future health can motivate you to exercise, watch your diet, and get an annual medical check-up. But "beyond that," Hibbs writes, "dwelling on future danger only makes me miserable and wastes my precious time." He goes on:

I choose hope over fear. Here's the way I figure it. Good and bad things happen. They have always happened and they always will happen. Once I have taken reasonable steps to protect myself from the bad things, I might as well focus on the hopeful possibilities.

Psychological research suggests that this kind of hopeful optimism is good for both our mental and physical health. This is true even if the

optimism is unrealistic. In other words it's better to err on the hopeful side than the fearful side.

You may or may not agree with the benefits of being unrealistically hopeful, but we can certainly agree on the downside of being unrealistically fearful. Dwelling on our fears can rob us of the joys and the rewards that are available to us even in this perilous world.

And so we must try to recognize when our leaders try to manipulate our opinions based on fear. When terror alert levels are raised or lowered seemingly arbitrarily, we must be skeptical and not play into the temptation of timidity. When suspicions are raised about whole categories of people because of their coloration or their accents, we must resist the temptation to close ourselves off from those different from us. When allegations are raised about non-existent weapons of mass destruction, or about highly dubious terrorist links in order to justify the horrors of a pre-emptive war, we must not be afraid to ask questions and express our doubts and our outrage.

And lest we get lulled into thinking that only one side of the political spectrum uses fear to its advantage, let me quote environmentalist Chris Bedford of the Maryland Sierra Club. In the organization's *Chesapeake* magazine, Bedford writes:

The news from the environmental front is bad. And it seems to keep getting worse every day. Over population, over consumption, economic inequities, simple greed and the seemingly endless ability of humans for self-deception not only threaten the survival of our species and countless others but hamstring our ability to respond, to act in different ways. . .

While we advocate for a vision of the apocalypse, the status quo purveyors offer a vision of increased ease and prosperity, of technological miracles allowing us to have our cake and eat it, too. We offer fear. They offer hope. . .

The truth is the prophets of doom often speak their "truth" a little too self-righteously. And we sometimes forget that hope is a far better motivator than fear. And when we encounter optimism based on delusion and self-deception, offering a positive vision based on reality is a far better counter than a cry of "the emperor has no clothes."

And so his magazine proceeds to articulate a vision of hope based in ecological reality. That's a lesson that we all could learn from. That is, rather than simply complain about how bad things are getting, we must seek a vision for a better future and a path to get there. That is, we must act out of hope, not out of fear.

Another lesson inherent in this way of thinking has to do with one of my pet concepts: balance. There's a narrow line to walk between being too fearful and not being fearful enough. As Stanley Hibbs pointed out, a healthy, realistic dose of fear can act as a motivator to positive action. But an unhealthy obsession with our fears has the opposite effect, paralyzing us into inaction by making any action seem futile. So be afraid, but not *too* afraid. Use your fear rather than letting it control you.

I'd like to spend the rest of my time this morning talking about some ways to move our minds and our energy away from fear and toward hope. And for this I turn once again to Michael Lerner, who points out that "We are continually making choices that tend to reinforce

one end of the spectrum or the other, both in ourselves and in those with whom we interact every day. . . Every action we take has the capacity to increase the love or the anger, the hope or the fear, that are the fundamental building blocks of the world we inhabit.” He then addresses the question of what to do when we feel ourselves or others stuck in fear. He writes:

Some valuable resources and guidelines grow out of the religious and spiritual traditions of the human race and have sustained people in times of darkness, sometimes empowering them to take steps toward hope:

1. Do acts of kindness, love, and generosity every day, even when you are not in the mood.
2. Let go of a commitment to outcomes. Do acts of hopefulness even when there are no rational grounds to believe that it will all turn out okay. [Incidentally, that’s my understanding of the distinction between optimism and hope. Optimism requires belief that things will turn out well. Hope can prevail even when they don’t.]
3. Find a friend with whom you can share your vision of the world you want. . . Make it a regular commitment to see that friend and share your own inner fears and hopes and hear his or her hopes and fears too. [You’re not in this alone. Don’t try to pretend that you are.]
4. Prayer and meditation. It’s possible to focus on the source of our fears, to be fully present to them, to experience them, and see that they are often less formidable than we may think.
5. Join and participate in a spiritual community that weekly celebrates a Sabbath of some sort, a day dedicated to celebrating the grandeur of creation and to remembering the moments in which hope surged forward. [I’ll be talking about the concept of Sabbath in more detail next Sunday. I hope to see all you back for that.]

And let me add two more of Lerner’s recommendations that are not explicitly religious or spiritual, but which are nonetheless worthy of consideration:

1. Participate only in political activities in which the leaders are psychologically and spiritually sophisticated enough to . . . give as much attention to making sure that their activities foster hope as they do to winning a specific political goal.
2. Whenever you are giving a talk, recruiting a person to some activity, writing a leaflet or op-ed, or trying to influence others in the public arena, always ask yourself: is this presentation giving enough attention to fostering hope?

And Lerner wraps up his recommendations with a reminder of the point I made earlier about you not being alone. You’re *not* the only one. “[H]undreds of millions of people want to build a world of greater love, kindness, generosity, awe, and wonder.” We all just need to find each other and get to work. And we can find each other one and two at a time, reaching out our hand to grasp that extended by the other, as in the story told by Rabbi Harold Kushner, who writes:

I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sandcastle by the water's edge. . . Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spent so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.

Only that person will be able to hope. May each of us be that person.
So be it.