

"My Rear Ransoms Yours, and Yours Must Ransom Mine"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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"Life Doesn't Frighten Me" Maya Angelou

Shadows on the wall
Noises down the hall
Life doesn't frighten me at all

Bad dogs barking loud
Big ghosts in a cloud
Life doesn't frighten me at all

Mean old Mother Goose
Lions on the loose
They don't frighten me at all

Dragons breathing flame
On my counterpane
That doesn't frighten me at all.

I go boo
Make them shoo
I make fun
Way they run
I won't cry
So they fly
I just smile
They go wild

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Tough guys fight
All alone at night
Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Panthers in the park
Strangers in the dark
No, they don't frighten me at all.

That new classroom where

Boys all pull my hair
(Kissy little girls
With their hair in curls)
They don't frighten me at all.

Don't show me frogs and snakes
And listen for my scream,
If I'm afraid at all
It's only in my dreams.

I've got a magic charm
That I keep up my sleeve
I can walk the ocean floor
And never have to breathe.

Life doesn't frighten me at all
Not at all
Not at all.

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

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Those who have attended the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association known as General Assembly know well the cavernous space that is the exhibit hall. In a way, the exhibit hall resembles a lively marketplace with vendors selling everything from clergy vestments to bumper stickers. It was at one such booth that I found the sticker that I promptly placed on my laptop.

SLIDE: Photo of LAPTOP WITH "LOVE [IS GREATER THAN] FEAR" STICKER

I put the sticker on my laptop in 2017 as a reminder that as dangerous as the next four years would be, a big wave of Love in the form of advocacy and protest would be the only way to push back on the ever present and growing-by-the-day level of fear. As I am on that laptop for many hours of the day's 24, that sticker is a persistent reminder.

Love is greater than fear.
 Love is greater than fear.
 Love is greater than fear.

If you believe it, say it out loud at home. Say it out loud in the chat.

Love is greater than fear.

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And I believe it. I do. And now, 4 years later, it seems to have proven itself correct: love roared back last week. The UU the Vote effort used as a slogan, as a hashtag "votelove". Millions of Americans did just that.

And ... but ... millions of Americans had as their unofficial hashtag "votefear". Because that's what's likely at the bottom of this heap of mess upon which we currently stand.

Fear. So much fear.

Let me tell you a scary story (that has a hilarious ending but the scary part speaks to an important point about the way that fear affects us).

This story is a "*Shadows on the wall / noises down the hall*" kind of story. I was frightened out of my mind.

A lifetime ago, when I was very young (and some of you know this) I was part of a performance troupe that toured around doing children's theater. To be clear: there was absolutely nothing glamorous about this tour. We mostly slept in gymnasiums and people's homes but the latter was rare. But on this one leg of the tour we were staying in a lovely private home in the Thousand Islands area of upstate NY. The house was right on the water.

Late into the night, after we'd all gone to sleep, I was startled awake by voices that I was sure were inside the house. I bolted upright and listened with the intensity of a threatened animal in the wild. I was sure that my fear – now pumping through my pounding heart - was confirmed. I was sure there were strangers in the house. My friend Billy was sleeping in the bed across the room. I quickly walked over to him and shook him awake. Terrified, I said, "There are people in the house." He stared at me through what I thought was a cloud of groggy sleep. I said it again, "There are people in the house." Still: blank stare. He reached out for me but I was so freaked out that I jumped back and said, now louder, "There are people in the house! We have to go downstairs to see."

It seemed that he was beginning to understand me.

The point is that my own fear infected and then inspired Billy's own fear so much so that he could not understand me.

Okay so here's the funny part – which I warn you, has nothing to do with this sermon's theme but it's too funny to leave out. We'll get back to the sermon in a second.

So, now I'm in Billy's face insisting we go down stairs to see what was what. He finally has the needed wherewithal to blurt out, "Have you NEVER seen a single horror movie in your entire life?! This is exactly when the good guys get slashed – *when they go downstairs to see what's what.*" I assure you that I did not laugh in the moment but I haven't stopped laughing since. *Anyway.* We armed ourselves – I kid you not – *with our pillows* and headed downstairs only to find that the voices I was hearing were coming from a boat on the water – making the people sound closer than they actually were. All was well.

Okay. Back to the sermon.

The point is, when we are afraid, it is difficult to grasp and understand anything much less the complex reality that is human nature. The slings and arrows that we aim at each other right now are most times grounded in fear and even if the fear is ungrounded, it doesn't make the fear any less real.

How do you talk through fear? How do you listen through fear?

I just want to pause and assure you that I remember well what I said last week specifically about evil so to be clear: I don't think there is any talking through or listening through evil. Those folks who paraded through the streets of Charlottesville, VA torches held high: there's no talking to them or any of their sympathizers. While I'm sure that at the foundation of their protest is a bottomless pit of fear, it is a bottomless pit for which I have no empathy.

But the vast majority of Americans are not evil. The vast majority of Americans do not ignore their better angels and our shared highest ideals in order to intentionally and adversely affect their neighbors.

Remember when Elea & Ellen and I preached a sermon together about wonder being the first step toward love? I think that wonder and then Love are the first two steps toward battling down fear. Perhaps wonder and then Love will help keep our collective fear at bay and bring us one step closer to those who supported the current administration.

Love is stronger than fear. Love is stronger than fear.

While in my basement doing laundry last week, I spied in a random open box a book that was practically calling to me. The title of the book is *No Fear Shakespeare*. (Spark Publishing, NY, NY 2004) The author takes all of Shakespeare's sonnets and translates them into modern, American English. The idea struck a chord.

Sonnet 120 is about asking a loved one to forgive us our trespasses with the stated commitment to forgive those who trespass against us. But you wouldn't know it if you were wrangled up in the fear that Shakespeare's verse sometimes strikes in the heart of many. So, here's Sonnet 120 without fear both in Shakespeare's English and modern, American English.

Carolyn:

*That you were once unkind befriends me now,
And for that sorrow, which I then did feel,
Needs must I under my transgression bow,
Unless my nerves were brass or hammered steel.*

Caitlin:

The fact that you were once cruel to me helps me now. Because of the sorrow that you made me feel then, I would have to be made of steel not to be bowed down to the ground with guilt over how I've hurt you.

Carolyn:

*For if you were by my unkindness shaken,
As I by yours, you've passed a hell of time;
And I, a tyrant, have no leisure taken
To weigh how once I suffered in your crime.*

Caitlin:

For if you've felt my unkindness to you the way I felt yours to me, you've endured a time in hell and I've acted like a cruel tyrant, never taking the time to think about how I once suffered when you committed the same crime against me.

Carolyn:

*O! that our night of woe might have remembered
My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits,
And soon to you, as you to me, then tendered
The humble salve, which wounded bosoms fits!*

Caitlin:

Oh, how I wish that your earlier sorrow had reminded me of how hard true sorrow hits, so that I would have apologized to you as fast as you apologized to me, giving you the medicine that an injured heart needs most! But your earlier offense against me can now compensate you for what I've just done.

Carolyn:

*But that your trespass now becomes a fee;
Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me.*

Caitlin:

My offense cancels out yours, and yours must cancel out mine.

But that your trespass now becomes a fee;
Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me.

This sonnet is a testament to the power of empathy and forgiveness. Of using the memory of the ways that we have been hurt not as a weapon but as inspiration to be quicker to forgiveness and compassion. For those with whom we disagree, can we imagine a way that their offenses may cancel out our own? A way to say, "Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me."?

Truth be told, in this moment, it's hard to see it ... *but I want to try*. But here's the big, fat caveat for me: although I'm grateful that there are people out there doing the really hard work of bringing seriously divergent points of view closer to each other; I'm not interested in that work nor am I well suited for it. But I do want to be capable of being in dialog with those voters who quietly voted for the current administration even though they know in their hearts that the president is not good for our country, much less not good for democracy in general. You know - the people who are not so hard-core. I have those people in my life, people I have always known to be good-hearted but who I now look at and think, as did the poet, "I don't know you and you don't know me." How do make our way into that conversation and toward those people?

How???

Dear Souls, this is all I got:

We've got a magic charm
To keep up our sleeve
And although we cannot walk the ocean floor
And never have to breathe ...

We do have the capacity to wonder.

And wonder is the first step toward Love.

And Love is greater than fear.

Love is greater than fear.

Maybe that's enough.

May it be so.

Amen. Blessed be.