

Fear Factor: The Marketing of Despair and Our Power to Respond

by the Rev. Sean Parker Dennison

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I'm not much of a reality TV junkie, but I make a point to watch at least one episode of each new show that makes it onto the air. That's how I came to be watching one of the early episodes of "Fear Factor." I suspect I watch these shows from a different perspective than the producers had in mind for their viewers. I watch them wearing my minister hat — on the lookout for the messages they are sending, the values they promote, and the trends in our society that they either predict or mirror.

I have to admit, that from that point of view, "Fear Factor" captivated me. Here's a show that is meant to make us squirmy and squeamish. We are entertained by watching other people face the things we fear — heights, insects, and eating bizarre things are prominent — and by somehow facing those fears vicariously through them. Whether we respond by peeking through our fingers as we cover our eyes or with bravado and the certainty that "I could have done that easily," "Fear Factor" is an overt attempt to make a profit from people's anxiety.

It's certainly not the first attempt to market fear. Haunted houses, roller coasters, and extreme sports are all attempts to exploit our natural human response to perceived danger. It's just that "Fear Factor" and other shows like it, have taken the heart-pounding, stomach-dropping, don't-want-to-look-but-can't-look-away feeling to new marketing heights.

Fear is one of a very few primal human emotions. According to Dr. Restak's book, from which Toby just read, fear is one of the few emotions that has two routes through the brain: a "high road" through our frontal lobes and a "low road" through the amygdala. If we come across something that we fear, this low road assures that our response will be quick and instinctual. We remove our hand from the hot stove before we consciously think "Ow. That's hot." Our heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing patterns change before we consciously "read" a facial expression as threatening. The "high road" of judgment, which takes just fractions of seconds longer, comes into play a moment later, when we begin to consciously assess the level of threat and the appropriate response. Shows like "Fear Factor" tap into this dual response. We feel the rush of adrenaline and the bodily reactions to fear before we're able to remember "it's just a TV show and it's not happening to me." Our brain then calms us down and lets us get on with being entertained.

But what happens when the human brain is exposed to fear and anxiety on a daily basis? What are the consequences of playing around with fear in this way? What does the constant stream of

anxiety-producing headlines and warnings do to us as individual and to our society? And how should we respond?

In his book, Dr. Richard Restak provides a comprehensive analysis of fear and anxiety. While he primarily focuses on individual anxiety, I found his analysis of a growing culture of fear to be even more compelling. Without going into the details of brain anatomy, chemistry, and psychology that Dr. Restak explains, it is important to know two basic things: while fear and anxiety are necessary and cannot and should not be eliminated, too much fear and anxiety can be disabling; and fear and anxiety are cumulative — the more often we feel them, the more they linger at the corners of our consciousness and the more sensitive we become. In other words, the more we worry the more we will believe there is much to worry about. The more we fear, the more we will believe there is much to fear. These beliefs are reinforced by the very cells of our body, which learn to be more sensitive to fear signals every time they are activated. The more we experience fear, the more our bodies will scan the environment for potential threats. And ongoing experiences of fear “build up” in our minds and bodies until it is possible we will experience not only fear, but hopelessness and despair.

The constant stream of anxiety-provoking images and messages we are being exposed to — what intelligence analyst David Rothkopf calls “infodemics”— create a climate of fear, anxiety, and despair. And because danger is associated in the brain with the unfamiliar, (our most basic and compelling fear is the fear of the unknown) a culture of fear is often a culture of divisiveness, xenophobia, and increasing tension and societal fragmentation. Fear in general most often becomes fear of the “other”—fear of the person who is not “like me,” however that is measured. Societies that are fear-driven are often places in which social norms are fiercely protected — places where conforming to “our values” and proving your patriotism and piety are both increasingly important and increasingly difficult. Sound familiar?

I think it’s safe to say that we are living in a time of great cultural anxiety. The events of September 11, 2001 made clear, for the first time in half a century or more, that the United States is not invulnerable. As the Twin Towers crumbled, so did our denial. And before the smoke even cleared, we were suddenly living in a world divided into “patriots” and “evildoers.”

I think it’s important here to point out a real distinction between information and fear-mongering. Terrible things do happen, and we should not be shielded from them. The recent earthquake and tsunami are a good example. Understanding the reality of the devastation and reaching out in compassion to help the victims and do what we can to respond is important.

But within hours, news stories were being accompanied by speculation — everything from interpreting the tsunami as proof of the imminent collapse of the planet due to global warming to references to the plagues of the apocalypse predicted in the book of Revelation — and the focus shifted from what happened to what could happen, what might happen...what can only make us afraid and uncertain (and maybe buy a few of the sponsors products to feel better...) Fear-mongering, subtle or not, is ubiquitous. Our culture seems to be enamored with and even dependent upon fear and anxiety. We use it to sell, to get elected, for motivation and for

entertainment. We live, for all intents and purposes, with an ever-increasing fear factor. Is this what we want? Is it what is best? Does it reflect our values as Unitarian Universalists? As Americans? As citizens of the world? How should we respond? In short, in the face of fear and fear-mongering, what are we to do?

Rev. Herbert Anderson, an Episcopalian priest in Seattle, Washington, wrote this in the days after the September 11th attacks, "Living with fear takes courage. Living with anxiety requires a willingness to keep company with many emotions. Living with terror deepens our need to trust one another..." Rev. Anderson's words unlock for me a deep paradox. Living in fearful times takes courage. It takes courage because, while we must accept and understand the real risks and acknowledge our real vulnerabilities, we must have the courage not to succumb to fear.

I have always been amazed and gratified that in the stories told in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, every time God or a messenger of God comes to the people, they begin with the words, "Be not afraid." For me, this is one of the core messages that we need to hear. "Be not afraid."

Even though there is much to fear, and our vulnerability is real, "Be not afraid." Even though we are not in control of the weather or of what will happen to us on any given day, "Be not afraid." Even though fear is buzzing through the airwaves and batters us from all sides, "Be not afraid."

The way I understand this message and its place at the heart of so many religious teachings is this, "Accept the danger, but do not let it paralyze you." The message is not "Feel no fear" — but "Be not afraid." Feel the fear, but do not live in it, do not become it. "Be not afraid."

This is one of the two meanings of the word that the choir sang about so beautifully: Acceptance. In this fearful age, acceptance is vital. We must accept the reality of our vulnerability and we must accept each other. We must not let fear divide us, nor can we afford to let it numb us to the needs and gifts of others. Again, according to Rev. Anderson:

Our first response to the threat of indiscriminate terrorism is to increase security however we can. It's an understandable and even necessary reaction to attack. But the more security we seek, the more our lives are ensnared with fear. There is an alternative. When random kindness rules, fear subsides. When we make peace daily through acts of neighborliness and mutual affection, terror can't control. The world is made and remade each day with simple, random, even anonymous acts of compassion.

It has often been said, and it is true, that the value that the most cultures and religions hold in common is hospitality. Whether it is called "neighborliness," "compassion," "acceptance" or "welcoming the stranger," hospitality is at the core of many faith traditions. Perhaps this is because it directly contradicts the self-protectiveness and fear of the other that fear instills in human beings. Hospitality and acceptance are radical ways to step out of our fear and make our

view wider than our own security and protection. In order to “be not afraid” we also need to “be not alone.” Isolation only compounds our fear.

There is a final important path we must take in this moment of history that claims caution as a primary civic virtue. While we are encouraged to be wary — to keep an eye out for those who are behaving suspiciously — to keep our eye on the terror alert status and on each other, we must not give into the increasing pressure to become merely docile watchers. We must understand the danger of making safety and security a primary goal of this nation. Over the course of human history, we know that terrible things have been done to protect safety and ensure security and we know that it in a climate of fear, repression and injustice can grow frighteningly powerful.

And so, we must cultivate the power to respond. Rather than wariness and inaction, we must contemplate responsibility — the ability to respond to the events and to each other. We are so often numb — so often feel overwhelmed and paralyzed by all there is to do — but that does not make us powerless. We have the power to respond, no matter how small that may seem. We can respond to each other’s need, we can respond to the needs in our community, we can respond to the policies of our government, we can respond to the conditions of this world. We may not be able to make our world perfect, but we can make it better.

While the news media focuses our attention on tragedy, there are a million stories — in the wake of September 11th and again in response to the tsunami and earthquake — of people reaching out to one another and creating more hope, more compassion, and more goodness in the world. Our ability to respond is the key to overcoming the paralysis brought about by so much fear and anxiety. One way to “Be not afraid” is to take action — no matter how small that act may seem — to make things better.

In a world that sells us fear and anxiety at every turn, we need a strategy to ward off paralysis and despair. Learning to “Be not afraid” — through acceptance of our vulnerability, hospitality to the stranger, and cultivating our ability to respond — is a path to keeping ourselves and our culture from falling into dangerous patterns of despair. May each of us do whatever we can to make the journey toward hope and to clear a path for others as we travel. Amen. Ashé. And Blessed Be.

CLOSING WORDS

(source unknown)

For all those who asked questions no one else would ask; for all those who broke down hurtful and bitter barriers;

for all those who welcomed those whom no one else would welcome;

for all those who dared to wonder about things they were not supposed to wonder about;

for all those who lived out their lives as the text of their faith;

for all those who refused to make exceptions;

for all those who reasoned with their hearts as well as their minds;

for all those who spoke when to be silent would have been safer;

for all those who maintained silence when to speak would have been to dominate;

for all those who gave of their lives and livelihoods that the dreams and visions of freedom, reason, tolerance, and love might live even though they themselves would not live to see the final outcome:

My bow! My thanks! My awe! My vow to let your lives move me past my own stuckness! My praise! My amen!

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