# Holding on to the Chain

A sermon by Jackie Clement
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL
September 11, 2016

As a kid growing up in New Jersey, I was a serious New York Yankees fan, but more, I idolized Mickey Mantle. I knew something of his struggles as a teenager to overcome a potentially fatal bone disease and to become a professional athlete, so in 1964 when he wrote a book, *The Quality of Courage*, I just had to read it. That book was where I learned two great lessons about courage. One, that courage is not only for the great and celebrated, but happens everywhere. And two, that courage does not mean fearlessness, but rather to be courageous is to feel the fear and choose to act for the good anyway.

It was a good lesson for an American kid in 1964, smack in the middle of the Cold War where every sinister TV character was Russian and where school lessons included duck and cover. It was a fear-filled world, one that seems to have only grown more anxious. With each tick of the Doomsday Clock and each color coded escalation of global terror threat we stepped closer to panic. With growing global awareness, instantaneous communication and the 24-hour news cycle to fill we know more and more of what frightens us. Today's date, September 11, is enough of a symbol to evoke terror.

And that fits the political and commercial ends of some people very well as we are constantly goaded into a greater and greater position of fear by politicians, by the media and by corporations with something to sell. Do you perhaps remember Lyndon Johnson's 1964 campaign ad that juxtaposed a young girl counting the petals on a daisy with the countdown to a nuclear blast and Johnson's voice over, "These are the stakes?" Or Ronald Regan telling us that were likely to be the generation that saw Armageddon? Or George W. Bush declaring as he launched the first attack of the Iraq war, "At some point we might be the only ones left, and that's okay with me."

Over the decade of the 90s, network news coverage of homicides increased six-fold, even though the murder rate actually fell 20 percent over the same period. The 11:00 news started airing teasers during prime time to alert you that bath toys are killing our families and only by watching channel 4 at 11 might you keep your family safe.

Before the cost of gas skyrocketed, the makers of SUVs did a masterful job of convincing us that only industrial strength protection on wheels would allow us to survive the hostile roads of America. Even something as mundane as the grocery store became a matter of survival because only with the right toothpaste, deodorant, soap, shampoo, and floor wax would you be worthy of being a member of the tribe that would protect you. As Frances Moore Lappé writes in *You Have the Power, "*The root of so much fear is fear of rejection and banishment. To be expelled from the tribe is death. Acknowledging fear is allowing our own sense of inadequacy to be perceived by others. We so desperately need each other's approval."

This is not to say that there aren't real things to be afraid of. There are plenty of real dangers, some of them immediate, many beyond our control. But here's the thing – living in fear, consumed by every thought of alarm, cuts us off from life. As Fran says in the movie *Strictly Ballroom,* "Vivir con miedo es como vivir a medias." A life lived in fear is a life half lived.

Yes, there are realities which are frightening, but that is not the full picture. The full picture includes a culture of false fears marketed to us as skillfully as Disneyland and iPhones. So why do we buy into this marketing concept of constant threat? Not because we are stupid or unaware, but at least in part, because we are engineered to belief by evolution.

Michael Schermer is a psychologist and science historian who writes about belief and how we humans have been wired by evolutionary biology to credulity. He asks us to consider the hominid of pre-history. He is walking across the savannah when he hears a rustle in the grass. Predator or simply the wind? Deciding that it is a predator when it is just the wind does not carry a very great penalty. Perhaps you feel foolish in front of your hominid friends, but no real harm ensues. But making the mistake the other way carries the price tag of becoming lunch for a hungry lion. The happy go lucky optimists are removed from the hominid gene pool. And so we have become conditioned over the long haul to assume the worst because the worst is our best chance for survival.

But as much as we may be conditioned to see danger even in the rustle of the wind, we have developed higher order brains which allow us to rationally consider all the facts, to distinguish between real dangers and dangers that are falsely perceived and to reason out a response to either one. Some fears signal immediate and real danger. If you right this minute have your head in the mouth of a tiger, you should be feeling fear. Just as you should when you are standing on the edge of an 1800 foot drop and you have to let go of the chain so that others can pass.

But there is also a type of fear that is learned and false. This is the fear that every stranger is a murderer, that every black man is a threat, that every Muslim is a terrorist. This is the fear that we are the generation of Armageddon, that bath toys are killing our families and that the wrong toothpaste will leave you alone and shivering in the cold. These fears all express a way of seeing the world as ruled by scarcity. It is a worldview that tells us constantly that there is not enough—not enough food, enough fuel, enough safety or law or kindness—and that we are in competition with every other person to get our share. It says that there is not enough love in the world to include you. It says that we are not enough. This is the type of fear that, unquestioned, breaks our society into shards.

In the book *You Have the Power*, Francis Moore Lappé writes "Yes, fear is old and automatic and in our bones, but it's not the whole story… Fear is not necessarily our protector. It can trap us into creating a world none of us wishes for or can long afford." Lappé and her coauthor Jeffrey Perkins urge us to shift our ideas about fear. We are never going to be without fear. Remember? Courage does not mean fearlessness. The fear will be there. But Lappé and Perkins say we can use the fear as a signal that something is trying to stop us and transform that into the motivation to move ahead.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said:

*You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' You must do the thing you think you cannot do.*

I think these words from Eleanor Roosevelt point to what really lies at the root of many of our learned fears—the fear that we are not able to cope. We fear that if we fall we will not be able to pick ourselves back up. We fear that is any one single thing that could go wrong does go wrong we will not be able to make it through to the other side. But we humans are enormously resilient, resourceful, ingenious. We wouldn't have survived for the last 200,000 years if we weren't really, really good at coping.

This year, we face a big job as a congregation, one that's going to require some coping skills because it is up to us to determine this church's future. A big piece of that future is our commitment to spiritual growth through religious education. Ten years ago this congregation made a decision to call an ordained minister to lead the religious education program. It was a huge leap of faith. It required a significant commitment of resources to a program that was chaotic and floundering. I imagine there was no little anxiety about that decision.

In church systems, as in many types of organizations, fear doesn't look exactly like what we might think. It doesn't look like a fear of snakes or even a fear that we just doomed the church to a really tough time. More often the anxiety pops out in different ways – in arguments, in people taking too much control or running in the other direction. But it's all just fear.

And so I extend the same invitation as Frances Moore Lappé and Jeffrey Perkins – when you feel that fear, that urge to bicker or take control or to run away—let it be a signal that something is trying to stop you from moving ahead. Know that you and we can cope and let the fear signal 'go' instead of 'stop.'

The decision 10 years ago to search for a minister was an incredibly successful decision, one that manifest in a real strength for this church. It might have been otherwise, and you would have coped with that reality, but it was the right decision for that time and circumstance. Now we have to trust that we can be just as successful in choosing the right path for this time and place. Trust that we can cope with any bumps that come along if we face them together. There is no assurance that we will always pick the easiest path. There is certainly no assurance that things will always be as they are. But there is assurance that we can cope.

We have everything here and in each other that will allow us to not only cope but to thrive. We have right here that which will help us distinguish between what is a predator and what is just the wind in the grass, between learned prejudice and actual threat. We have here what is necessary to live more than just a half life. We have right here in this room the chain to hold on to in order to move beyond our fear.

This is the usefulness of the religious process. It forges the chains to hold onto while we are climbing that steep path and everything in our brain is screaming that someone else is going to grab onto us while they are plummeting off the edge. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross names it love saying, "…there is only love or fear, for we cannot feel these two emotions together, at exactly the same

time. They're opposites. If we're in fear, we are not in a place of love. When we're in a place of love, we cannot be in a place of fear."

Francis Moore Lappé names it gratitude saying, "Fear and gratitude don't coexist easily in the same heart. I found that as I stayed centered in thankfulness for my many blessings…,my fear eased and my mind cleared."

Others call it God or community or the ground of all being. Replace the fear with this, with the knowledge that the chain is stronger than you can imagine, and hold on to the chain.

I offer you the words of Janet Morley:

and you held me and there were no words
and there was no time and you held me
and there was only wanting and
being held and being filled with wanting
and I was nothing but letting go
and being held
and there were no words and there
needed to be no words
and there was no terror only stillness
and I was wanting nothing and
it was fullness and it was like aching for God
and it was tough and warmth and
darkness and no time and no words and we flowed
and I flowed and I was not empty
and I was given up to the dark and
in the darkness I was not lost
and the waiting was like fullness and I could
hardly hold it and I was held and
you were dark and warm and without time and
without words and you held me

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.