

I will show you fear in a handful of dust

David Adams Richards

“I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

Such is the message from T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. “And we are and will be, a handful of dust.” All my life I have wondered about such a line, and why it is so relevant. Why so much of the world, so many of the decisions made by people, so many of our thoughts of others, leading to actions are ones which are determined to cause the world uneasiness, oppression, and fear.

I think we know that people are at their finest when they laugh spontaneously like a child. But something wishes to destroy our laughter. There is something in us that wants the child in us to fail, the laughter and joy in us to be ended, snuffed out. It is the darker party that roams our unconsciousness, that inhibits, oppresses, and hinders who we are meant to be.

The brutality of the world around us is constant. Yet people have always stood against it. Brave people, entirely ordinary people in so many ways have stood time and again against the dissemination of the world because their very nature and their moral fiber bids them do so. At times we might not realize where this strength of character comes from. A strange young boy standing up against a man who is bullying his daughter, a person who chooses to stop an action that is corrupt. The terror they often had to face in order to prevent fear from overcoming others shows that courage and love is greater than that great weapon of terror people use—a weapon not of their own power but something given to them.

T. S. Eliot suggests that fear in all its manifestations was not part of the dust that is us but might be something given to it, by some entity that was foreign. That does sound silly, perhaps, but if so then why would Christ have told us not to fear? I think it is because every problem that seems now so manifest in our lives has already been addressed, and all trepidation has already been defeated by something greater than it. That the battles going on in our lives are much more than we might think, and have more bearing to the spiritual world than we might be willing to admit.

“I will show you fear in a handful of dust” is a metaphysical line about the creation of the world we are in. Those who do not believe in the Garden of Eden any more can still believe and understand the disastrous fruits of temptation. And if God created us from the dust of the world, he did through free will allow us to be tempted, and that temptation led to pride, and that pride created fear. In Milton’s great poem *Paradise Lost*, Satan gives birth to pride, that is flung from his head. They copulate and create death for mankind. Fear is born from the existence of pride.



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Oh yes, it is only a poem about allegorical entities, people will say, but none have ever written better about the nature of duplicity in the name of sanctity and lies in the name of truth than John Milton.

But there is something else as well that causes fear—and that caused the question, “How do you know you are naked?” that God asked Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis (as if it was asked yesterday afternoon) to be so profound. Adam and Eve clothed themselves

through the sudden feeling of guilt—by guilt they were exposed. Guilt comes when we knowingly embrace the lie. But one cannot fear or even cause fear until one has guilt. The two conditions are synonymous with the fall from paradise, and synonymous with each other. We lessen our guilt when we lessen our fear, and vice versa.

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So in many respects many people no longer believe the very source from which fear derives because they have given any idea of evil up. “No such thing as evil” is the view of certain social justice advocates I have met. There are causes and effects, constructs of power and weakness, and, yes, bad decisions made, but no evil, so many of our intellectuals say.

Evil, some say, is a construct of the church. But when we see it, evil in all its sniggering manifestations, when we see evil in Rwanda or Iraq, we know we have existed in a world where evil sparkles, and we cannot escape from it by saying it does not exist. In fact, so often the more we see it, the more some of us are given to ignoring it and saying evil is not evil.

But let us look at some who stood up against evil by simply being decent. Let us look at them and ask ourselves who we would rather be. Let us ask ourselves now whether we rather be he who hid Anne Frank or he who ran to his German betters and snitched? This may be an extreme example, but it's one that all of us will have to deal with in our own way at a certain time. And then, after it is all over, what will we be able to say?

I think of the woman whose lame son was to be put into the gas chamber at Auschwitz, and though she was not selected, she went with him so he would not face death alone. By that action, she is sainted, by that action not one of her oppressors had the slightest victory over her. Is

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that what Christ asked when he asked us not to fear the world? For whom was it who feared that world after 1945? It was not her; it was men who lived by that world and tried to dominate it. These were the men who now feared. Most of them—Himmler, Goring, Goebbels, and Hitler himself—were filled with a vile terrified humanity at their end. They, like certain Mafia Dons, were their own gods, reduced to a pathetic pathology, running away. To see Himmler dressed

as a refugee trying to escape prosecution by standing in line with the very people he persecuted might give us some pause to realize that all things about us and others will be and have been addressed.

Stalin too, Supreme Soviet that he was, created a bestial nest of vipers, of Beria, Malenkov, and Molotov, where he was himself caught. It was terror that he created for everyone, but especially for himself.

Tolstoy said of Napoleon, emperor and atheist, that in the end, leaving Moscow, he only wanted to run away.

So there must be something beyond the world that allows fear to dissipate, to fall under the weight of something purer, and to leave those who lived by it forsaken and alone. Picturing Napoleon rushing toward Paris, while somewhere on the Steppe a child is dancing in the first snowfall, might show us the difference between the collapse of power and the beginning of love.

To make the line "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" understood.

It might also be helpful to understand what the Roman senator Seneca said about Nero, “No man can instill fear in others that he does not in himself possess.”

In fact, I think this might be the most important of observations.

That is, Nero, as emperor and god on earth, put not only Seneca to death but also Saint Paul. At the end hiding in the basement of a summer villa, he was too terrified to act and had a centurion help him commit



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suicide. Do not think I am gloating over what is wretched. I am only stating that Seneca spoke a truth for all time. And so did Paul when he wrote, “I have fought the good fight.”

The good fight was against fear, and for love.

That is, there is something remarkable in Christ’s message, which might be this: The less fear we have, the less we will instill fear in others, and the less we will need to use fear for power, and the freer we will ultimately be to care. To dance like that child in the snow while

Napoleon and his entourage flee Moscow, desperate to get away, leaving 80,000 men behind him to die.

Those who care for someone do not often fear them. Those who fear someone often do not care to be in their presence. Not instilling fear frees us in the end and makes us more human and closer to the divine. Fear might bring us power for a while, but it is bound in the end to fail us all. It fails everyone in one way or the other.

The best and most useful way for us to avoid fear is never to try to use it. That is difficult, but it is also noble. It also speaks to a real and evident truth. So often those who fear create a mirror image in others they wish to have fear them. This is what disputes and injustices and hatreds are made of. Those who do not wish to create fear in others have in the end much less fear in themselves. So when Christ says, “Do not fear the world,” he also means, “Do not attempt to cause fear in the world because it will come back upon you.” As it did for Judas Iscariot that long ago night.

Even childbirth now causes fear. I have witnessed those championing the poor being the first to try and stop a pregnancy even in midterm. How much alarm does someone have in order to exercise this power? It

is strange that Christ in a manger caused not fear but celebration. Christ who tells his disciples and us not to fear the world because he has overcome the world. So how did he overcome the world? In what way did he overcome it, and for what reason must we listen to him about it? This overcoming, where did it come from—that is, where did the need to have to overcome dread come from? At some points in our lives many of us, or most of us, have experienced dread, the feeling that we have no power over the events now surrounding us and most likely to harm us in some



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way. Yet if we believe him, Christ has overcome it all. He has overcome every struggle. And he did not overcome it two-thousand years ago for himself. He overcame it at this moment for us. That is, all the dread of the world has been already overcome. If we believe this, we are less likely to fear the world as much as the world wishes and desires us to fear. We are far less likely to try and get others to fear us in some manufactured merry-go-round of hatred and mistrust.

You see, no matter how progressive our ideology might be, the darkness of Satan is still evident in the webs around us, if not as an actual entity, then certainly as a condition willing to create terror.

I grew up in a place, a town, a society where those who existed for the perpetration of crimes against others wanted for their own vainglory to cause terror in others. And seeing this we, the townspeople could—in order to protect ourselves—become immersed in their cold-blooded vanity in order to be protected from them. That is, many of my friends befriended those who caused fear in others in order to fit in themselves, to become unwitting partners in the glory of crime—not by committing crime but by excusing those who might do so, as being heroic, or anti-heroes, or the misunderstood in our society. In so doing, they did not have to pay the price of reflection or to oppose that which was not only unlawful but many times immoral. This is when it struck me that something in our society feeds on fear and uses it to protect and promote immoral behavior and crime. It also made me reflect for the first time in years on the true nature of good intention and evil. That evil was the main building block of our society—that coercive and overt violence played their part to inhibit good intention. The coercive violence in society was the building block

of the more readily recognized overt violence. So many were coerced into becoming good pals with those who did bad things, in order to protect themselves. But, you see, once those people were brought to justice, once they were fallen entities, those who so befriended them—calling them “misunderstood” or “good guys”—had very little to do with them. In fact, they were as appalled by them as others were. This is not to say we must be self-righteous in response to others. It is simply to say we must recognize why we take the action we do. Fear is not compassion for the misunderstood rebel; it is not tolerance; it is not acceptance; fear is distress over one’s personal safety dressed up in altruism. It cannot and will never create love or acceptance.

The sadness of this is the fact that we do live in the world. Yes, but all of us can feel in the gladness of children, in their spontaneous joy, a feeling that has often been eclipsed by the world. This is the true celebration of life that God has instilled in us. In this joy we see something much greater, much more noble than the vainglory of power and crime. It eclipses it really and forever.

Remember the child dancing when Napoleon is rushing away, or Himmler dressed as those he persecuted, with a cyanide pill in his pocket, and you will be better able to reject it. You will be better able to say as Christ did: “I’ve seen Satan fall like lightning.”

I ask you humbly to believe those words, because they are true.

About the author

David Adams Richards is an acclaimed novelist, essayist, screenwriter, poet, and Canadian Senator who has been named as one of the world’s fifty most essential Catholic thinkers by *The Tablet*. His writings have been translated into twelve languages and are part of the curriculum of Canadian and US universities. He has been a writer-in-residence at several universities and colleges across Canada and has received honorary doctorates from three New Brunswick universities and the Atlantic School of Theology. He is one of only three writers to have won in both the fiction and non-fiction categories of the Governor General’s Literary Award; he was a co-winner of the 2000 Giller Prize for his novel *Mercy Among the Children*; and he has received numerous other prestigious awards, including the Canada-Australia Literary Prize, two Gemini Awards for scriptwriting, the Alden Nowlan Award for Excellence in the Arts, the Canadian Authors Association Award, the regional Commonwealth Writers’ Prize award, and the 2011 Matt Cohen Award for a distinguished lifetime of contribution to Canadian literature. He is a member of the Order of New Brunswick and the Order of Canada. The Writers’ Union of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University have established annual awards in Mr. Richards’s name.