

# Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

## **“Be not afraid”**

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# Editorial

Justin A. Neufeld

So many things make us afraid.

We are distressed by events in our churches, our communities, and our nations. We are grieved by the neglect of kindness, by swelling self-righteousness, by loyalty to untruth and pitilessness. We are brought low as we discover that persons, communities, and nations can be runaway trains protecting their interests at the expense of the interests of others.

We are frightened by sickness and pain. We see the bodies and minds of our beloveds begin to totter. We see our own bodies and minds turn against us, making us strangers to ourselves. And we observe souls trembling and withering under these physical and mental changes.

We watch friends and children disappear into addiction, into depression, into anxiety, into despair. We ourselves may settle into the basement of loneliness and self-disregard. The world outside our doors may become too much, pressing in the walls of life, even as we also pull them inwards to fashion a windowless room.

We are surrounded by enemies. Our names and the names of our beloveds have been slandered and mocked. We have been derided and cast out from circles of belonging and warmth. We have been forced into physical and spiritual poverty by the cruelty of others. Our lives are in the hands of those who hate us, men and women aroused by our abuse.

At the door also are our dark thoughts, our uncontrolled lusts, our hatreds and resentments, our vanity and insecurity. With these dark thoughts have come dark deeds, for we have given these thoughts food and lodging. In our hearts' unlit rooms lurks an insatiable me-firstness keeping company with the despoiler, the adulterer, the murderer, the betrayer.

We are rattled and humiliated by challenges to our faith. The confounding variety of human belief and worship, the unthinkable size of the universe and Earth's peripheral place in it, the incomprehensibly long and prolific evolutionary story in which humans occupy an extremely tiny subplot, and the capacity of scientific explanations to render religious explanations foolish—it all leaves us reeling.

We are haunted by the incompleteness of life. Life's gifts are so good yet so fragile and fleeting. And not only do these gifts come and go, but

we also fail to embrace their beauty because we are overcome with concern that they might begin to crumble before their time. Then we realize just how much our anxiety prevented our knowing and loving them, how it



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stole from each of us, and this realization only compounds our anguish over them and ourselves.

We are overwhelmed by our destitution. For so long we thought we were being good and doing well; then circumstances changed painfully to reveal that, in truth, hidden judgmentalism, unacknowledged selfishness, and disavowed resentment separated us from the good we want—now desperately—for ourselves and others. “My iniquity is too great to bear!” we cry out.

We are silenced by silence. There is loss and pain and loneliness that calls out for cosmic redress, yet no one—no one!—seems to pay them any attention.

But after all, we ask, who can? What compensation can time or eternity offer to those who have been injured so grievously?

Yet in the Bible we read:

*Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh. 1:9)*

*When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. (Ps. 94:19)*

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)*

*As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. (Ps. 103:13)*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (Prov. 9:10)*

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:29)*

*I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world. (John 14:33 NLT)*

Concerning this final verse from the Gospel of John, Jean Vanier writes:

*This is the final message of Jesus for each one of us,  
in all our loneliness,  
when we feel rejected and abandoned:  
“Trust, for I have conquered the world.”  
Yes, trust, for Jesus is leading each one of us to greater truth  
through the Paraclete.  
He is leading the whole Church  
through time  
to a deeper understanding of his message.  
He is leading each one of us into the new  
through much pain and many deaths.<sup>1</sup>*

When I invited authors to contribute to this issue, I included the above list of fears along with this passage from Vanier and asked them to examine whether and how the Bible’s exhortations to “fear not” finds support in their experience and study. We all know persons whose fear has turned to grief and whose hopes have gone unfulfilled. Nevertheless, I asked contributors to consider whether, amid these losses, Christianity holds out the possibility of becoming part of a “we” that is never put to shame.

Admittedly, the form and substance of the invitation was driven by my own concerns and preoccupations, and it informed both the voices I sought and the personal approach I suggested. The month of April brings me into the twelfth month of living with the deepest fears I’ve yet met in life, fears into which I entered just after I received this assignment. More months are in store, certainly. My fears are not the deepest fears possible, and I realize there are many more occasions for fear and many different

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004), 289.

kinds of fear than my own. But my fears have been breathtaking, and undoubtedly this influenced the approach I invited from authors. I was looking for help. Can there be consolation amid disconsolation?

Not all the causes of fear are personal or existential. But there is no fear without persons, without expectancy for the future and dread of what it may bring. So while this issue could have addressed systemic causes of fear, I am glad that its authors did not choose systems over persons. The issue of fear remains inescapably personal, and there is no systemic solution to the problem of fear, no taming of heart and circumstance by policy or structure or ethics or medicine alone—or in combination. This too is fearful.

We fear because we relate expectantly to the possibility of evil, loss, and rejection in the future, both for ourselves and for our beloveds. We hope because we relate expectantly to the possibility of goodness, victory, and welcome in the future, both for ourselves and for our beloveds. But



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are we poised equidistant between these alternatives, with equal chance of either outcome? Maybe it is not that evenly distributed, sadly. Maybe hope belongs primarily to youth and privilege and diminishes with age and poverty. This too is fearful. It's also entirely sensible.

But if this is true, what foolishness that Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden light, that we should take heart through our trials and sorrows because he has overcome the world. And what foolishness that saint Paul tells us that love hopes all things and is never put to shame. What fools—if they are spokespersons for the world.

But they never said they were. They said they were spokespersons for the kingdom of heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. To defeat fear at all times we need to have occasion to hope at all times, and this occasion cannot come through the world alone; it can only come through God, who did not leave the world alone but set up his tent in its midst in the flesh of Jesus Christ.

“Jesus is *risen*. Jesus is *Lord*.” So take heart. No infirmity of flesh or mind or spirit, no sin or evil—your own or another’s—can extinguish the

possibility of good for you or others. So fear not, and receive the gift of hope—in all things, always—given in love for you. Or as one of our authors puts it: “May the peace of Christ continue to bind up our fears and threaten us with resurrection so that future generations will be left a legacy of hope.”<sup>2</sup>

It has been good for me to invite and receive the contributions for this issue. I am thankful to each of the authors for what they have written. I have been blessed by them, and I hope they are a blessing to you and that God speaks to your heart through them.

*Do not fear, for I am with you,  
do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isa. 41:10)*

### **About the editor**

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2 See S. Lesley Sacouman’s essay in this issue, “A child will lead you.”

# Consolation and challenge

## Signs of the Holy One

Waldemar Janzen

It was in the spring of 1952, and I was sitting in my mother's and my apartment in Waterloo, Ontario. I was preparing for the final examinations at the end of my first year as a student of Waterloo College (now Wilfrid Laurier University). These exams would be worth 80 percent of my final grades in five courses. Having immigrated to Canada only four years earlier and struggled with the language, I was not confident. Then, in my sporadic Bible reading, I stumbled onto the words of Acts 18:9–11:

*One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*

These words spoke to me. *The Bible teaches us to be brave*, I thought. *I will also be brave and not fear while preparing and writing my exams.* I did so, and I passed with fairly good grades, except for a D in English. Professor Clark had graciously given this immigrant a pass rather than an F. I thanked God and proceeded in my studies.

Simplistic interpretation of the Bible? Yes. Naive? Yes. But was I wrong? We will return to this question.

### Interpretation

The Old Testament formula *Do not be afraid!* in Hebrew consists of two words: *Al tira* (fear not). It occurs forty-four times across many books in the Old Testament and is always translated in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as *Do not be afraid!* Other English Old Testament versions render it as *Fear not!* or similar phrases. The widespread appearance of the formula might suggest that the Old Testament strongly encourages its readers to be fearless and brave, but that would be a serious misunderstanding. The word "fear" (including in our formula) occurs 281 times in the NRSV Old Testament. Many persons in ancient Israel express fear of

all kinds of danger without being admonished not to be afraid. We need only to think of Job and the lament psalms—texts that are full of outcries of fear in all kinds of situations without being encouraged by our formula.

Fear, like pain, was a ubiquitous experience in biblical Israel, just as it is today. Although always unwanted, fear and pain are there at least in part to protect us. Without fear or pain we would not avoid or try to protect ourselves from many dangers. Indeed, there are many admonitions in the

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Old Testament *to fear*—and especially to fear God. These passages, however, refer less to ordinary fear of dangers than to awe, reverence, obedience, and devotion due to God. To be God-fearing is almost equivalent to being a believer and a follower of God, a God who must always be approached in a way that combines respect and devotion as well as a sense of mystery. And yet, this God who is to be

“feared” is at the same time the most frequent subject or speaker of our formula *Do not be afraid!* Let us sample some situations in which God tells someone not to be afraid.

(1) The formula *Do not be afraid!* first occurs in Genesis 15:1. Abraham has been asked by God to leave his homeland for a land that God will give to him and his many descendants so that they might become a blessing to all nations. He and Sarah, however, are old and childless. He despairs of God’s promise. God, however, assures Abraham in a vision, “Do not be afraid!” and reaffirms the promise.

(2) At the behest of Sarah, Abraham sends his Egyptian concubine Hagar, with her young son Ishmael, out into the wilderness. Her provisions and water soon run out. We read in Genesis 21:16–19:

*Then she went and sat down opposite [her young son] a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw*

*a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.*

(3) The Israelites, having escaped from Egypt, found themselves between the pursuing Egyptian army and the sea. They cried out to Moses, and he replied, “*Do not be afraid*, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again” (Exod. 14:13).

(4) During the conquest of the land of Canaan, the Lord tells Israel’s commander Joshua, “*Do not be afraid* of them, for tomorrow at this time I will hand over all of them, slain, to Israel” (Josh. 11:6).

(5) Ruth, a Moabite, faithfully accompanied her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, to Judah after a great famine there was over. She had to support herself and Naomi by gleaning after the reapers in the fields that were being harvested. The owner of the fields, Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi’s family, took note of her. When he found out her identity, he said to her, “And now, my daughter, *do not be afraid*, I will do for you all you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman” (Ruth 3:11). Eventually Boaz, as the nearest willing male relative to Naomi, followed the law and married Ruth. Thus a refugee from abroad was treated fairly and given a place in society.

(6) Our last sample, Jeremiah’s call, is told in Jeremiah 1:4–8:

*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,  
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”  
Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how  
to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me,  
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the LORD.”*

Jeremiah faithfully followed his call as God’s prophet for the next four decades, in spite of much opposition, hostility, and persecution.

On the basis of these six Old Testament stories, we can make some observations with respect to central features and contexts that throw light on the meaning of the formula *Do not be afraid!*

First, in all six samples, the encouraging message comes from God. In samples (1), (2), (4), and (6), this is explicitly stated. In (3) and (5), it is implied.

Second, this message is conveyed in various ways: in a vision (1); by an angel of God, or heavenly messenger (2); through Moses, at God's direction (3); directly from God (4), (6); and by Boaz, motivated by observing the law of God (5).

Third, the recipients of the encouraging formula vary greatly: Abraham, the chosen ancestor of Israel (1); an Egyptian concubine (2) the Israelites fleeing Egypt (3); the leader of Israel and successor to Moses (4); a young Moabite widow and immigrant (5); and a young boy in Judah (6).

Fourth, the address serves different objectives: to strengthen Abraham's confidence in God's long-term plans (1); to keep Hagar from despairing of worry for her child, Ishmael (2); to call Israel to trust in God's redemption from Egypt rather than to capitulate in despair (3); to strengthen Joshua's and Israel's courage to fight for the Promised Land (4); to assure the widow and refugee Ruth of acceptance and security (5); to strengthen Jeremiah, the young boy, for his long prophetic ministry (6).

Finally, in all of these examples our formula not only exhorts the person addressed to rally his or her hope, courage, and stamina; it also somehow instills these. It is a formula that has power.

## **Transcendence and epistemology**

That it is God, or someone speaking for God (an angel, Moses, Boaz), who addresses a person or a group with the consoling but also empowering words *Do not be afraid!* underscores the Old Testament understanding that this message comes from a *transcendent* source. Unlike the gods of Israel's neighbours, who were generally personified powers of nature (sun god, storm god, god of rivers and seas, fertility goddess, etc.), the God of Israel was understood, with increasing conviction, to be transcendent—that is, from beyond our world. To worship anyone or anything within the universe was considered idolatry.<sup>1</sup> Humans can “influence” this God only

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1 Cf. Waldemar Janzen, “The first commandment of the Decalogue and the battle against idolatry in the Old Testament,” *Vision* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 15–24.

in one way: prayer. God, however, can send a divine message to humans in countless ways. Collectively, we call such communication *revelation*.

Like the Old Testament, the Christian faith thus involves us in questions of *epistemology*—the pursuit of knowledge. How can we know when and in what manner God speaks to us? My brief formulation of an answer is this: When something ordinary overcomes me with the conviction that it is given *to me* as assurance or guidance in a particular situation, I may recognize it immediately or later as having sign character. If many people receive similar signs, we call it “revelation.”<sup>2</sup> Here are some personal examples:

1. Above I told how a word of God to Paul encouraged me to study confidently for my exams. Had I failed those, I would probably have given up academic pursuits, and my life would have taken a different turn.

2. Each of our six sample texts shows God (or God’s agents) addressing persons in need, in danger, or of diffident spirit. When I think of encouraging and empowering signs in my life, my thoughts first turn to my early years under Soviet oppression, of World War II, and of narrow escapes from the grip of Soviet forces and subsequent banishment to a Siberian labour camp. Here I will recall one such experience. Mother and I made a daring attempt to escape from the Soviet-occupied Zone of Germany. We failed and only narrowly escaped our captors. We took various trains and ended up at night, exhausted and despairing, on a dirty platform in the main station of the city of Magdeburg. I was in the depth of hopelessness. As we sat there, Mother felt a paper in her coat pocket. It had been pushed there, just before we set out, by Frau Schepler, a younger woman who was a neighbour to our refugee home, to which we now had to return. Mother read it to herself and then to me. Our friend wrote that if our escape attempt should fail, we should come back and she would try her best to help us. Mother regained some courage, as did I. Frau Schepler kept her promise, devising an ingenious way for us to escape some months later. Was her letter a message from God? Was she an angel (“messenger”) sent by God? There can be no empirically demonstrable confirmation, nor should one attempt a rational explanation. Some events simply acquire sign character.

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2 The biblical use of “sign” (Heb. *’oth*; Greek: *semeion*) has long been central in my understanding of “revelation”; see Waldemar Janzen, “Sign and Belief,” in *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 15–28 (essay first published in 1972). Although the article requires updating, it still conveys my basic position regarding its main claims.

## The question of God and evil

Our findings so far may raise the question: Why does God need to encourage and empower the persons addressed with *Do not be afraid!* in order to cope with difficult situations? Why does God not avert or modify those situations? Such thoughts eventually lead to the further question: Why does a loving God allow, or even bring about, situations perceived by us as evil?

In my view, such disturbing or offensive aspects of *both* Testaments, such as violence, suffering, sickness, and ultimately mortality, lie at a deeper level than is accessible to human reason and exploration. That deeper level is God's transcendence. God's ways cannot be researched and analysed by the human mind; they can only be revealed to us by signs. Rabbi Harold Kushner attempted to resolve the problematic paradox of

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a world where “bad things happen to good people” despite our faith in a God who is both all-loving and omnipotent. Kushner concluded that God, although always loving, is limited in the full exercise of this love by autonomous laws of nature, by human freedom of choice, and possibly by an evolutionary dimension in God himself.<sup>3</sup>

Such attempts to resolve this overwhelming and daring paradox, although appealing at first glance, remain superficial and inadequate. The fallacy in Kushner's approach is the assumption that,

given our advanced understanding of the universe, all the evidence to reach a conclusion on the question of God in relation to love and evil “is in” and that the human mind has the capacity to process such data adequately and reach a satisfactory intellectual understanding of what otherwise would stay a paradox: the affirmation of an all-loving and all-powerful God and the existence of what we experience as evil.

The Church throughout the centuries has instead (correctly, I believe) held fast to what can only be formulated as a true paradox—namely, that the Holy One is both supremely powerful and supremely loving, and yet

3 Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981).

evil persists in the world.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the biblical meta-story in both Old and New Testament reveals God's presence and acting within a cosmos where—to our necessarily limited mental grasp—good and evil seem inextricably intertwined. Only through sign-events, climaxing in Jesus as the supreme sign, can we become convinced that God's *ultimate* goal is our and the world's redemption and eternal life, as proleptically revealed to us in the resurrection of Jesus.

Further, if we could dissociate the character of the biblical God from war and violence by way of some rational explanation, as Kushner and others have tried to do, would we then not be forced to regard such a God as irrelevant to our experience of the real world? Alternatively, if we can see the life-giving and sustaining work of God shine through the darkness in the ancient biblical world, then we can gain hope for ourselves and others in the world in which we live.

## Conclusion

Let me come full circle. In my childhood in the Soviet Union and the subsequent war and refugee years, an “awareness of the holy”—as I call it in retrospect—grew in me, was given shape by the biblical story, and was confirmed by (often veiled) sign experiences as the reality that transcended everyday life. It was not an easy and unproblematic reality, but one to struggle with, as Jacob at the Jabbok did (Gen. 32:22–32), sometimes leaving me injured, but in the end, also blessed.

## About the author

Waldemar Janzen was born in Ukraine in 1932, experienced Soviet persecution, World War II, refugee life in Germany, and immigrant adjustment to Canada. After a long teaching career, he has been retired for some time as professor (emeritus) of Old Testament at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He and his wife, Mary, are members of the First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, where he is also an ordained minister (now retired). Among his many writings is the Believers Church Bible Commentary *Exodus*.

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4 To try to dissociate God from evil in the world by reference to Satan or to God's permissive will is of little help here, for one can ask immediately: Why does an all-powerful God tolerate a cosmic power of evil, Satan? Or why does a good God permit evil (of whatever source or kind) to happen? Using such language serves a certain positive purpose, however: It expresses our (appropriate) reticence to attribute evil too boldly to God, and thereby it helps to safeguard the paradox mentioned above.

# A child will lead you

S. Lesley Sacouman

“Be not afraid.” Impossible. Jesus experienced a crippling fear that ripped apart the core of his being and left him on the verge of despair. The servant is not greater than the master. So who are we to expect anything different?

Fear has been my lifelong companion. For forty years, I lived and worked alongside inner-city children and youth. Fear skulked around, darkened my days, and split open my nights. Love alone conquered Fear. Love drew me close to the broken hearted, those who bleed, who stink, and who talk back. Love dared me to hear their cry and to taste their pain. Love whispered, “See their goodness. Touch their joy. Be not afraid.” Slowly Fear recoiled and life became a daring adventure. Today Fear and I are on pilgrimage together. Cords of loving kindness bind us with a peace beyond understanding, a peace that disturbs profoundly and that threatens resurrection.

In 1970, two Holy Names sisters and I moved into the inner city of Winnipeg. Our move was a direct response to God’s invitation, “Come and see.” We saw single parent families, bent over and broken, struggling against terrible odds just to make ends meet. We saw sexually exploited youth skipping school, stealing, selling drugs, and raising havoc in the neighbourhood. We heard children crying in the night, abusive language, and sirens. We heard silence, a silence that pierced the darkness and screamed, “I can’t take it anymore.”

All of this affected us deeply, but it did not transform our lives. What seized our imagination and made all the difference was the resilience and courage of the children and youth. They appeared so hard-edged, yet they melted with the smallest act of kindness, a simple hello. Their prophetic smiles enlarged our hearts and goaded us, “If you have come here to help me, then go home. But, if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let’s work together.” That challenge shook us to the core and put our integrity on the line. Would we walk away, or would we stand up and be counted simply because it was the right thing to do?

Living in the Core Area and learning from the neighbours was pure gift. Our lives bubbled with meaning and adventure. However, over time the physical and emotional violence began to take its toll. One night I

woke up to the sound of screaming and swearing in our backyard. I jumped out of bed, looked out the back window, and saw some guys swinging baseball bats and attacking each other. Immediately, I called the police.



**Each segment of our journey shook me, sifted me, and spun me into uncharted waters. All Sheila ever asked was that I not run away. And with each step, doors opened. Changes, surprises, and God made them all.**

The attendant just kept asking me these inane questions: “How do you know that someone is going to get hurt?” I lost it and yelled, “Just get a car here fast before someone is killed.” This was one of many sleepless nights I spent sitting stark upright in bed waiting for the obscenities and hostility to end. Soon after, I began to wonder how much longer I could handle this and whether I needed to move somewhere else. This question brought me to my knees. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change

the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

A few months later, God answered my prayer: “Lesley, be not afraid. A child will lead you.” That child’s name was Sheila Sunshine. Sheila died this past summer. Her obituary read, “Sheila Sunshine passed away on July 18, 2018.” Her life deserves more.

*The spirit of the Lord is upon you, Sheila.*

*You are God’s mystery, God’s chosen treasure.*

*God has anointed you to bring good news to the afflicted.*

Sheila was my mentor. She nourished my heart, stretched my thinking, and challenged my values. She burst the barriers of my comfort zone by unmasking the lie and uncovering the scandal. Sheila taught me some raw and basic lessons. No child should ever have to steal to eat, break and enter to sleep, or be sexually exploited to survive. “No child who does not want to be alone should ever have to be.” Each segment of our journey shook me, sifted me, and spun me into uncharted waters. All Sheila ever asked was that I not run away. And with each step, doors opened. Changes, surprises, and God made them all.

Sheila was eight going on thirty. She was a spunky child with long black hair and flashing brown eyes. She lived nearby in a dilapidated house with her addicted mother and three younger siblings. At three o’clock one morning, Sheila appeared at our door, clutching her baby

brother. The dark circles under her eyes betrayed the pain and horror of the night. Her two younger brothers, ages four and six, were glued to her side. Slowly, they entered the living room, settled down in front of the television, and soon fell sound asleep.

*Be not afraid, Sheila.  
I will be with you, howsoever, I will be with you.*

By the time Sheila turned eleven, she had quit school, was sniffed up constantly, and had become a chronic runner. Hurt and frightened, she lashed out at her workers. When alone, she was withdrawn and would cry for hours. Elizabeth Barrett Browning warns us, “The child’s sob in the silence curses deeper than the strong man in his wrath.”

*Blessed are you, Sheila,  
you who mourn and weep in lamentation.  
Nothing can separate you from the love of God.  
Nothing, Sheila!*

When Sheila reached the age of thirteen, the group home system washed its hands of her, exercised its legal revenge, and locked her up. Sheila was not wanted; she didn’t fit in; she was disposable. Refusing to be shackled, she escaped and took to the streets. Hunger and fatigue became her constant companions. Because she was young, the pressures great, and her resources few, she buckled under the weight of hopelessness. Lost and confused, she spent her time scheming on how to attain drugs, alcohol, sniff, anything to help her cope with the night ahead. The threat of HIV or of impending death did not scare her. The bottom line remained; who cared anyhow?

*Sheila, you are precious and honoured in God’s sight.  
You are carved in the palm of God’s hand.  
God cannot and will not forsake you.*

At eighteen, Sheila stood in a court of law, her head bowed in shame. The judge demanded she show some respect and look up at him when he was sentencing her. Then, in front of everyone, he condemned her, “You will never amount to anything.” The judge’s harsh words were cemented forever in Sheila’s mind. They confirmed her absolute worst fear. She hadn’t committed a crime; she was a crime.

*Blessed are you, Sheila,  
when people persecute you and revile you.  
Trust not those who know not God's Spirit,  
or yours or even their own.*

Sheila had no fixed address and lived her young adult years in degrading hotels where she was forced to perform sexual favours in order to pay her rent. These hotels were repulsive. The stairs and hallways reeked of stale urine. The windows were shattered, and bed springs protruded through the mattresses. When I visited her, my whole being recoiled. I wanted to take her home, but she refused. The burden of love was too heavy for her to bear.

*God, you have called Sheila by name.  
She is your beloved child.  
Please, be her rock, her stronghold.*

One bitter December day, I took Sheila and Gerry, her boyfriend, out for pizza. Later that evening, she experienced terrible abdominal pain and thought she had food poisoning. In truth, she was going into labour. Not having a cell phone or even a quarter to use a pay phone, Sheila and Gerry headed out on foot to the hospital. When the contractions became too intense, Gerry took off his jacket and lay it on the freezing snow so that Sheila could sit down and regain her strength. No one stopped to help. I wonder what people were thinking as they drove by and surveyed this scene?

*Sheila, in your flesh and blood you bear salvation.  
The source of all life can live in you.*

As soon as they arrived at the hospital, Gerry phoned, and I rushed over, told the receptionist I was Sheila's mother, and proceeded straight to the delivery room. One hour later, baby Gerry was born. After his birth, the doctor drew me aside, slipped three hundred dollars into my hand and whispered, "Get something special for Sheila and Gerry." I wouldn't be surprised if his thoughts were with another couple who gave birth over two thousand years ago.

The next day Sheila was discharged, and baby Gerry was left behind. Child and Family Services would not allow her to keep her child. Sheila and Gerry blamed and hated themselves for this. Nine months later, unable to face himself any longer, Gerry drank oven cleaner and died. Sheila

was devastated, having lost her child and now her partner in less than a year.

*Who could imagine Sheila's future?  
She was struck down, cut off from the land of the living.*

Years later, on Christmas day, Sheila arrived at our home in a Safeway shopping cart pushed through the heavy snow by Mike, her new friend. Sheila's chronic sniffing was stripping her of her ability to walk. We were glad to see Sheila and had presents for her and Mike under the tree. About six o'clock, we sat down for a delicious meal with all the trimmings. Within ten minutes, Sheila had gulped down her food, jumped up to clear the table, and washed the dishes. We all sat there wide-eyed, for we had barely touched our food. Still, our hearts overflowed with gratitude for Sheila's precious gift of herself to us.

*Yours is a special benediction, Sheila.  
Each time you visit and break bread with us,  
God meets, greets and touches us with peace.*

Years passed. Addiction and street life were damming Sheila and Mike. Death lurked around every corner if something drastic didn't change. Together, they quit sniffing and moved to Saskatoon, hoping to begin life anew. For a few years they did well. They had two healthy boys whom they loved and were determined to shield from the trauma they themselves had experienced. But in the end, violent, systemic poverty that had brutalized Sheila and Mike all their lives won out. Both boys were taken and put into foster care. Sheila's final years were sad. She was beaten, crushed, and humiliated.

*God, please!  
As a mother comforts her child,  
hold her to your breast; give her a drink.*

Fear overshadowed Sheila's entire life, yet she was never afraid. Sheila was the keeper of her own heart, and no thief in the night could steal it from her. Her spunky spirit in life and in death defied despair. Sheila loved at great cost and right until the end.

*Blessed are the merciful.  
Blessed are you, Sheila.  
You who place no limits on your yes,*

*who share your scraps of food,  
your toilet paper, your sniff, and  
everything and anything else  
your heart has managed to salvage.*

Not one of us wants to face Sheila, nor look into her piercing, dark eyes.

*Like a sapling, she grew up in front of us,  
like a root in arid ground,  
a thing despised and rejected,  
a child of sorrows,  
a young girl to make us screen our faces.*

Sheila does not condemn us for our negligence, our harsh judgments, our apathy or abuse, but her life does uncover the scandal, and it unmasks the lie.

Sheila Sunshine passed away on July 18, 2018. Sheila shattered my fearful heart and unleashed hope. This prophetic woman was true to her name, Sheila Sunshine.

*Peace is Jesus's legacy to you, Sheila,  
peace that surpasses all understanding,  
peace in fullest measure, pressed down and running over.*

My hope in entrusting Sheila's story to you is two-fold. First, I pray that her life challenges and leads you to take Christ down from the cross today and eliminate structural poverty. Second, when you meet Sheila on the street, in McDonald's, in the hospital, or in your office—and you will—be not afraid. Please stop, take off your shoes, and say, "Hello," for the ground on which you stand is holy.

May the peace of Christ continue to bind up our fears and threaten us with resurrection so that future generations will be left a legacy of hope.

### **About the author**

S. Lesley Sacouman, SNJM, is founder and executive director at Holy Names House of Peace, a home in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where hope empowers eighteen newcomer women to live life and begin anew. In 2004 she received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from the University of Winnipeg, and in 2017 she received the distinguished alumni award for community service from the University of Manitoba.

# Not just another animal

## Evolution and human distinctiveness

John Brubacher

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honour.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Ps. 8:3–8 NRSV)*

### A thought experiment

I seem to have developed preoccupation with the concept of “heaps.” Imagine yourself sitting at a table, with a bag of fine-grained sand. You put one of the tiny grains of sand from your bag onto the table. Is there a heap of sand on the table? Obviously not. So, you add a second grain of sand to the first. This is still not a heap. You continue in this way, one grain at a time. At some point, you *will* have a heap of sand on the table, by any reasonable understanding of what a heap is. The question is, when—at what point, precisely—did the non-heap become a heap? Not sure? OK, try going in reverse. Start with your heap and take away grains of sand, again one at a time. When does the heap stop being a heap?

There is no exact point at which adding a grain turns a non-heap into a heap or removing a grain turns a heap into a non-heap; nevertheless, iterative addition or subtraction will turn one state of being into the other. Paradoxes like this one—known as *sorites* paradoxes, after the Greek word for heaps (*soros* is the singular form)—have been known since

the classical era.<sup>1</sup> For related fun, imagine adding hairs to the head of a bald man. At what point is he no longer bald? Or, in your favourite digital illustration software, make a gradient of colour that smoothly shades

**There is no exact point at which adding a grain turns a non-heap into a heap or removing a grain turns a heap into a non-heap; nevertheless, iterative addition or subtraction will turn one state of being into the other. Paradoxes like this are known as sorites paradoxes.**

from red to blue—where does the colour decisively shift from one to the other? Despite the blurry margins between the poles of such series, it would be absurd to argue that, because individual steps in the series have near-imperceptible effects, therefore heaps are not real things or red is really just blue.

Such classical formulations of the sorites paradox are low-stakes mental exercises. I confess that my opening sentence above was mostly tongue in cheek; I don't lose sleep worrying about heaps, and only very little if pondering my receding hairline. Serious discussions of the paradox note that "soritical" circumstances usually involve a vague predicate—

one that is difficult or impossible to define precisely—like bald, red, or heavy.<sup>2</sup> We are generally content to live with blurriness at the borders that distinguish between *adjectives* like tall and short or green and yellow. However, one of the reasons that soritical scenarios are seriously discussed today (and rightly so) is that they also apply to several *things* (nouns) of philosophical and practical significance. As a biologist, I am especially intrigued by its applicability to several fundamental biological processes: At what point in your life did you become an *adult*? When does a developing human embryo become a *person*?<sup>3</sup> In our evolutionary history, when did

1 Roy A. Sorensen, "Sorites arguments," in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, 2nd ed., edited by Jaegwon Kim, Ernest Sosa, and Gary S. Rosenkrantz (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 565–66.

2 Dominic Hyde and Diana Raffman, "Sorites Paradox," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/sorites-paradox/>.

3 Reasonable people might argue that this is a flawed example because personhood begins at conception—an embryo is *already* a person. Fair enough, but "conception" itself is a fuzzy term, which might justifiably be defined to begin with fertilization, karyogamy (the union of sperm and egg nuclei), activation of the embryonic genome, or implantation. These processes span days; see, for example, Peter Braude, Virginia Bolton, and

our ancestors become *human*? It is the latter question that I want to consider here, to examine the implications of evolutionary theory for what it means to be human.

I should clarify that I do not intend to litigate the veracity of evolutionary theory here. For what it's worth, I am a fully convinced evolutionist. Like the great evolutionary geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky,

I cannot make sense of biology without evolutionary theory,<sup>4</sup> any more than a chemist can make it through the day without atomic theory. My question, rather, is this: If we accept the theory of evolution, what does that imply about humanity?

**At what point in your life did you become an *adult*? When does a developing human embryo become a *person*? In our evolutionary history, when did our ancestors become *human*?**

### **Evolution as a soritical series**

In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin laid out his “long argument,”<sup>5</sup> that we and the living organisms around us today are modified descendants of those that came before—that ultimately we can

all trace our ancestry back to a population of one or a few forms of proto-organisms. The notion of evolution was not new with Darwin. The novelty he set out was a plausible mechanism that could account for both (a) change over time and (b) the exquisite adaptation of organisms to the ecological niches they occupy.<sup>6</sup> That mechanism, natural selection,<sup>7</sup> works

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Stephen Moore, “Human gene expression first occurs between the four- and eight-cell stages of preimplantation development,” *Nature* 332 (31 March 1988): 459–61.

4 Theodosius Dobzhansky, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,” *American Biology Teacher* 35, no. 3 (March 1973): 125–29.

5 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 6th ed. (London: John Murray, 1876), 404; available at [http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1876\\_Origin\\_F401.pdf](http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1876_Origin_F401.pdf). Darwin’s characterization of the entire book as “one long argument” is found in all editions; see, e.g., p. 459 of the first edition.

6 A niche, in the ecological sense, refers not only to an organism’s physical surroundings but also to its way of making a living—the role that it plays in its biological community.

7 The principle of natural selection was also independently arrived at by Alfred Russel Wallace, “On the tendency of varieties to depart indefinitely from the original type,” *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society* 3, no. 9 (20 Aug. 1858): 53–62.

on the following simple (but easily misunderstood or mischaracterized) logic:

1. Individuals in a population *vary* in their characteristics.
2. Those variable characteristics (at least some of them) are (at least somewhat) *heritable*: transmitted from parents to their progeny.
3. In a situation where resources are limited,<sup>8</sup> individuals whose characteristics are well suited to their context will be more likely to survive and *produce healthy offspring* than individuals who are less-well adapted.<sup>9</sup>

Over time therefore, well-adapted organisms will leave more progeny to posterity, and to the extent that their traits are heritable, those traits will appear in an increasing proportion of the population.<sup>10</sup> Natural selection would be expected to result in gradual change of a population of organisms *in a series of incremental steps* from generation to generation.<sup>11</sup>

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8 Resources should be considered broadly to include not only raw materials for life but also suitable habitat or mates, for example.

9 This is the point that Darwin referred to as the “struggle for existence,” a metaphor that is often misunderstood too narrowly to imply a state of unrelenting aggressive conflict. Here is how he describes the generality of the “struggle” when introducing it in chapter 3 of *Origin*: “I should premise that I use this term in a large and metaphorical sense including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny. Two canine animals, in a time of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant on the edge of a desert is said to struggle for life against the drought, *though more properly it should be said to be dependent on the moisture*” (italics mine).

10 As a slight aside to correct a common misconception, note that selection is by definition *non-random*. While the variations referred to in point 1 derive from genetic mutations that *are* random (at least in regard to their potential utility) reproductive output and survival of progeny are not simply arbitrary but are dictated at least in part by the conditions and rules of the surrounding ecosystem, including the basic physical laws woven into the fabric of creation. For a more nuanced scientific perspective on the potential for directionality emerging from the evolutionary process, see the papers collected in Simon Conway Morris, ed., *The Deep Structure of Biology: Is Convergence Sufficiently Ubiquitous to Give a Directional Signal?* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2008).

11 When Darwin first published *Origin*, knowledge of heredity and organismal development was in its infancy. As our understanding of these phenomena has increased, so has our appreciation of the fact that some evolutionary changes can occur rapidly enough to be easily perceptible by us in real time. This more nuanced understanding does not, however, invalidate the principle that evolution generally proceeds gradually—“insensibly” (imperceptibly), as Darwin put it.

Thus, it seems to me that the evolution of a given lineage is a good example of a soritical series. Although the overall evolutionary tree of life forks and branches as lineages diverge from the root, one can trace an unbroken line from the tip of any one branch back to that root.<sup>12</sup> If you were to reconstruct such a path, you would see a transition from one type of thing to another, in which the difference in subsequent generations would be imperceptible, much as we saw a gradual transition from a non-heap to a heap in the thought experiment above. While a heap may be a poor analogy for a complex living organism, it is not a huge step of imagination to see how a process of agglomerating sand-grains that produces a heap might be extended in time and scope to produce, say, a temple. If we accept that humans share a common evolutionary history with the rest of the living world, then such reasoning can apply to the emergence of humanity.

### **Fear: Humanity as one animal among many?**

The nature and role of humanity is a core concern in Christian theology, as it is bound up with central doctrines of creation, sin, Christology, and salvation, to name just a few. There is a great deal at stake here for Christians, as has been clear from Darwin's day. In chapters 2 and 3 of his 1871 treatise on human evolution, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin discussed at length the relationship between the mental capacity of humans (arguably our most obviously distinctive feature) and other animals, which he summarized in part as follows:

*The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, &c., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals. They are also capable of some inherited improvement, as we see in the domestic dog compared with the wolf or jackal. If it be maintained that certain powers, such as self-conscious-*

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<sup>12</sup> As with so many things in biology, this principle is not quite universally applicable. For example, many organisms have chimeric histories arising from the transfer of genetic material (DNA) between distantly related lineages, or the origin of novel branches via the fusion of previously distinct ones, when two separate species become so inextricably interdependent that they cease to exist as separate entities. Thus the tree of life has some weblike characteristics.

*ness, abstraction, &c., are peculiar to man, it may well be that these are the incidental results of other highly-advanced intellectual faculties; and these again are mainly the result of the continued use of a highly developed language.”<sup>13</sup>*

Such blurring of the distinction between humans and our non-human relatives is in tension with several core passages of Scripture that speak directly to human origins and role in the cosmos. In particular, Genesis 1:26–28 springs to mind, echoed in the passage from Psalm 8 above:

*Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”*

In the second account of creation in Genesis 2, we see additional markers of human distinctiveness in the man’s role as keeper of the garden (v. 15) and his appointment to name all the other animals, which were to serve as the man’s helpers (vv. 18–20).

These are clear—and I believe theologically non-negotiable—assertions of humans’ special status. Given that doctrinal starting point, it is understandable that Christians would be concerned about or even fearful of the notion that a gradualist evolutionary history for humanity frames us as different from other animals “only in degree, and not in kind.” Indeed,

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13 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, vol. 1. (London: Charles Murray, 1871), 105; available at [http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1871\\_Descent\\_F937.1.pdf](http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1871_Descent_F937.1.pdf). Modern readers should consider the context of this quote, both in the book and in the late-nineteenth-century setting. Darwin was making a case for the plausibility of human evolution from non-human ancestors, which required him to stress *continuity* along the evolutionary branch leading to humanity. At the same time, he also clearly felt compelled to stress human distinctiveness—a fine line to walk. Indeed, this passage follows paragraphs in which he emphasizes the *differences* between humans and a hypothetical ape that could describe its subjective existence to us. Nevertheless, the notion that differences between humans and other animals are “of degree and not of kind” seems a fair summary of Darwin’s view.

this is a common rationale for objecting to the theory itself among Christian anti-evolutionists.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, while such arguments may dispute the veracity of human evolution, they fundamentally agree with Darwin about what it implies.

But do we really have to fear that common ancestry with other animals (or for that matter, amoebas, algae, and bacteria) robs us of the things that make us special—of the mysterious ways in which we embody and mirror God’s image? I think not.

**Do we really have to fear that common ancestry with other animals (or for that matter, amoebas, algae, and bacteria) robs us of the things that make us special—of the mysterious ways in which we embody and mirror God’s image? I think not.**

If human evolutionary history is an example of a soritical process as I’ve argued above, then drawing the conclusion that humans cannot be distinct from the rest of God’s creatures is not only unnecessary but also absurd. Indeed, University of Nottingham theologian Conor Cunningham has argued that it is *anti-evolutionary* to infer that humans are “merely animals” in the light of evolutionary theory, as doing so denies the capacity of the evolutionary process to produce genuinely novel traits.<sup>15</sup>

From a biblical standpoint, it seems that humanity’s distinct status comes

from our special creation by direct, creative acts of God. While a “natural” process *could* produce such a biologically distinctive life form as humanity, such scientific (naturalistic) accounts of our emergence leave us without the spiritual distinctiveness conferred by God’s hands-on activity. But who or what is a Christian to propose as the origin of natural processes (includ-

14 See, e.g., Roger Patterson, *Evolution Exposed: Biology* ([Petersburg, KY]: Answers in Genesis: 2007), chap. 10; <https://answersingenesis.org/human-evolution/ape-man/the-origin-of-humans/>; Jonathan Wells, *Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth? Why Much of What We Teach About Evolution Is Wrong* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2002), chap. 11. I do not mean these citations to imply endorsement of these authors’ anti-evolutionary arguments, which I and most biologists find deeply flawed. See, e.g., Kevin Padian and Allen D. Gishlick. “The talented Mr. Wells,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 77, no. 1 (March 2002): 33–37; [https://ncse.com/files/pub/creationism/Padian\\_Gishlick\\_QRB\\_2002.pdf](https://ncse.com/files/pub/creationism/Padian_Gishlick_QRB_2002.pdf).

15 Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3–5.

ing evolution) if not God?<sup>16</sup> Additionally, while we often stress the special creation of humanity in Genesis 1 and 2, I am also struck by the poetic phrases that highlight our earthy origins, and I think we would be wise to take that language seriously. For instance, Genesis 2:7 states, “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”<sup>17</sup> The mode of creation (minus the “breath of life”) parallels that used to produce other living things such as trees (“Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food,” Gen. 2:9) and the other animals (“So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air,” Gen. 2:19).

We are not gods or angels but creatures evolved from the “dust” of this planet—related but not identical to our evolutionary cousins.<sup>18</sup> This is not a cause for fear or denial but another call serve our divinely ordained role in humility and awe of the Creator.

### About the author

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16 I am keenly aware that significant issues of deism and theodicy arise when one too-simplistically identifies evolution as a mechanism of God’s creative activity, and I fear that I’m venturing into that territory here by pointing in that direction without providing additional nuance. That said, if evolution seems too wasteful, indirect, or hands-off to be used for creative purposes, consider that Frances Arnold, George Smith, and Sir Gregory Winter used just such a process of random mutation and (non-random) selection to generate the novel enzymes and antibodies for which they were awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize in chemistry. See Sara Snogerup Linse, “Scientific background on the Nobel Prize in chemistry 2018: Directed evolution of enzymes and binding proteins” (Stockholm, Sweden: Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, 2018); <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/10/advanced-chemistryprize-2018.pdf>.

17 As is often noted, this is a meaningful pun: the original Hebrew puns *adam* (the man) with *adamah* (dust of the ground).

18 The English “creature” derives from the Latin *creatura*: a created thing.

# 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.



**Guilt is where all fears come from, guilt over the never ending lie in the name of truth. So much so that at its greatest point it breeds evil. We recognize it in others, and they at times recognize it in us.**

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.

Guilt is where all fears come from, guilt over the never ending lie in the name of truth. So much so that at its greatest point it breeds evil. We recognize it in others, and they at times recognize it in us.

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

**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.**

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



**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.**

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



**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.**

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.

# Miriam Toews's parable of infinite becoming

Grace Kehler

Hailing from the Mennonites of the Manitoba prairies, Miriam Toews has deservedly earned an international reputation for her incisive narrative witness to multiple forms of violence—especially those that transpire within Mennonite communities that derive from a long tradition of pacifism. In a 2016 article in *Granta*, she aligns herself with her novelistic forebear Rudy Wiebe, noting that, as the title of Wiebe's 1962 debut novel declared, “peace shall destroy many.” She elaborates that “pacifism and non-conflict, core tenets of the Mennonite faith, may in fact be sources of [intra-communal] violence and conflict, all the more damaging because unacknowledged or denied.”<sup>1</sup> For Wiebe and for Toews, pacifism gets perverted into devastation when its practitioners become fearful of theological inquiry into the difficulties of fostering peaceable relations in the everyday and foreclose on open conversations regarding the insidious creep of power even into intentionally alternate community. Overwhelming desires to maintain (impossible) levels of purity—along with the desire to possess peace rather than to consent to the lively *and* costly obligations it creates in the daily—inadvertently beget a culture that forcefully suppresses unwanted affects and dissenting voices precisely under the theological guise of non-conflict. Perhaps because Toews has explicitly spoken of herself as a “secular” Mennonite,<sup>2</sup> her novels, unlike Wiebe's, have not garnered substantial attention for their theological perspicacity. But, as I have written previously, her critiques of Mennonite power structures and church practices simultaneously call for a genuine, active pacifism to sup-

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1 Miriam Toews, “Peace Shall Destroy Many,” *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing*, 23 November 2016, [granta.com](http://granta.com).

2 See her recent interviews, including Ben MacPhee-Sigurdson, “Something to talk about,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, 17 August 2018, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/something-to-talk-about-491128111.html>; Deborah Dundas, “Find out why Miriam Toews’ new novel is going to have us all talking,” *Toronto Star*, 17 August 2018, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2018/08/17/miriam-toews-novel-women-talking-is-bound-to-get-us-to-do-just-that.html>.

plant fearful quietude.<sup>3</sup> Her cries against oppression are cries for lost—and possible—relations. Anger is not the opposite of love,<sup>4</sup> as she displays in her most recent novel, *Women Talking*, the text on which I reflect in this piece. With “LOVE” blazoned in multi-coloured letters on the front cover and “ANGER” on the back, in the pages between Toews not only audaciously imagines what it might look like if a group of violated, illiterate Mennonite women restored a feminist peace theology from below; she also draws on the tradition of biblical parables to model a fearless exploration of the horizons of human possibility when radically reoriented by the divine.<sup>5</sup>

### The power of parables

In Paul Ricoeur’s influential definition, parables function metaphorically and engage the “limit-experiences of human life”: dwelling at the limits, parables not only treat the extremities of affect and experience but also surpass and transform what a given community or era prescribes as the limits of the real.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Ricoeur and other prominent critics, including Giorgio Agamben and John D. Crossan aver, parables do nothing less than pose the problem of recognizing and responding to messianic potentialities in the present—potentialities that show the “kingdom of heaven” in its earthly manifestations.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, parables draw on hyperbole, paradox, scandal, and reversal—on extravagant narration and query—in order to invoke the newness and disorientation that accompanies divine

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3 See Grace Kehler, “Heeding the Wounded Storyteller: Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness*,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 37–59; Kehler, “Making Peace with Suicide: Reflections on Toews’ *All My Puny Sorrows*,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 338–47; Kehler, “Transformative Encounters: A Communal Reading of Miriam Toews’ *Swing Low*,” in *11 Encounters with Mennonite Fiction*, edited by Hildi Froese Tiessen (Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 2017), 158–76.

4 Beverly Harrison published a widely influential article on this topic. See Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The power of anger in the work of love,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1989): 41–57.

5 The preface to *Women Talking* by Lynn Henry, the publishing director of Knoff Canada, prompted me to consider the novel in terms of a parable, a comparison that has proven illuminating.

6 John Dominic Crossan, ed., *Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, Semeia 4, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 34.

7 Crossan, ed., *Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, 32, 98, 155; Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford University Press, 2017), (19–32); and John D. Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2012), 117–27.

eruptions in and interruptions of the quotidian. The parable, thus, is a “heuristic fiction” that has metaphoric power of redescribing human experience through the lens of the redemptive, the restorative.<sup>8</sup> Yet metaphor is not didactic or proscriptive; it is a quintessentially participatory form of communication. Metaphor creates the new, the previously unapprehended relations of things, and requires both active apprehension and translation into the daily. Drawing on metaphor, the parable functions evocatively, inviting its hearers or readers to stop fixating on the finitude of material life and to attend, instead, to “the divine, within us and among us” and hence to the infinite horizon of possible becomings.<sup>9</sup> Not only is this extravagant parabolic invitation addressed to all; in addition, as the Gospels demonstrate, it occurs in educationally peripheral places—such as fields and seaside—as opposed to the official institutions of religious instruction.

### ***Women Talking* as feminist parable**

Such extravagance of hope and the possibility of infinite, divine becoming courses through *Women Talking*, a feminist parable of women largely reduced to animalistic, instrumental functions of work and sexuality who come to radically redefine for themselves the manifestation God's presence within and among them. The novel offers a fictional response to historical events in the Bolivian, Old-Order Mennonite colony of Mani-toba, from which eight men were charged with (and ultimately convicted of) repeated night-time anesthetizations and rapes of approximately 130 women and children over a four-year period (2005–2009).<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, Toews imagines two days of colloquy among a delegation of eight, fully alert colony women after the apprehended men have been charged but before they have been convicted. In the symbolically peripheral space of a hayloft, the women—functionally illiterate, cut off from larger society, and socio-legally subordinate to their male relatives—struggle to determine a

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8 Crossan, ed., *Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, 85, 120.

9 Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 60. Both scholars on the parables (Ricoeur and Crossan) and feminist theologians (Irigaray and Groz) draw on the image of infinite horizons.

10 The most comprehensive news coverage of the Bolivian crimes and their aftermath comes from Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, who initially wrote a piece for *Time* and then a more extended piece for *VICE*. Toews also mentions the historical crimes in the first section of *Women Talking* and in her *Granta* article.

course of action not only practical but also, as importantly, theological. Colony elders have admonished the women that they will forfeit salvation and the heavenly kingdom should they withhold forgiveness from their assailants—creating a punitive God that resembles the violent patriarchs of the colony. Tellingly, the initial conversations of the women move unevenly between anxious references to an otherworldly kingdom that they

**At their limits, at their crucible, they come to know that the messianic kingdom of love, restoration, and forgiveness “requires the present tense.”**

ultimately hope to attain and common stories of—and comparisons of themselves to—animal life.<sup>11</sup> Their discourse, however, acquires an increasingly parabolic inflection as it supercedes binaries (flesh and spirit, here and after) and explores the requirements of Christian faithfulness and love *in the present*, in the unresolved, inadequately addressed reality of extreme violence within a pur-

portedly pacific community. One character, Salome, puts it bluntly: “We know that we are bruised and infected and pregnant and terrified and insane. . . . We know that if these attacks continue our faith will be threatened because we will become angry, murderous and unforgiving.”<sup>12</sup> At their limits, at their crucible, they come to know that the messianic kingdom of love, restoration, and forgiveness “requires the present tense.”<sup>13</sup> In the adroit phrasing of Giorgio Agamben, “Those who carry on maintaining the distinction between reality and parable have not understood the meaning of the parable. Becoming parable means comprehending that there is no longer any difference between the word of the Kingdom and the Kingdom, between discourse and reality.”<sup>14</sup>

Becoming parable is, of course, no easy matter. Embracing the radical incarnational potential of the divine presence necessitates the bewildering work of reconceiving the finitudes and delimited horizons that tend to anchor a life. As Toews sees it, as do many feminist theologians, the embrace of the divine entails additional challenges for women (and other vulnerable peoples) situated in severely circumscribed or violent patriar-

11 Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 26, 28.

12 Toews, *Women Talking*, 119.

13 Agamben, *Fire and the Tale*, 23.

14 Agamben, *Fire and the Tale*, 30.

chal cultures.<sup>15</sup> That the colony women are talking frankly about sexual as well as theological violence within their peace community is already an extravagance, a scandal, and a paradox of the highest parabolic order since, as the women iterate, they have been voiceless, inculcated in obedience and submission, and prevented from reading, let alone interpreting, Scripture. They have been, in Luce Irigaray's words, "deprived of God" and offered only distorted models for their own becoming, models which make a mockery of Christian forgiveness and redemption.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Christ's, their psychosomatic sufferings do not function reparatively but rather serve to further shatter individuals and community alike as repara-

**As Toews sees it, the embrace of the divine entails additional challenges for women (and other vulnerable peoples) situated in severely circumscribed or violent patriarchal cultures.**

tion gets conflated with imposed muteness and injunctions to forgetfulness. The eight talking women must, therefore, push past the trauma of annihilated subjectivity—of a subject position that cannot be heard—to forge a language from the scraps of theology permitted them, while subverting that very theology in order to redeem it and their faith as a "homeland."<sup>17</sup> "Forgiveness," "love," "peace"—these are terms they grapple with in order to turn them towards a

wider hermeneutic and to new lived horizons via unknown roads.

Toews underscores the challenges of begetting the yet-unrealized messianic through the women's recurrently stated worry that they "don't have a map of any place."<sup>18</sup> This is a literal problem for the women, who eventually conclude that departing the colony offers the only means of assuming guardianship of their own souls and that of their children. As germanely, the non-existent map (which they've not been taught to de-

15 Carol Penner and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite supply important discussions of sexual and theological violence in peace communities, including the violence of a theology that seeks to silence already shattered subjects by imposing forgiveness on them and that fails to offer genuine reparation. See Carol Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (PhD diss, Toronto School of Theology, 1999); Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Berlin: Springer, 2016).

16 Irigaray, "Divine Women," 64.

17 Toews, *Women Talking*, 151.

18 Toews, *Women Talking*, 52.

cipher, in any case) also references two distinct theological precedents: historical Mennonite leave-takings for the preservation of a faith community and the parable with its emphasis on significant life departures from the ostensible “security of home” as it applies in politics, life, and faith.<sup>19</sup> As Agata, one of the eldest women sums up, “We’re embarking on a journey. We’re initiating a change that we have interpreted . . . as being God’s will and a testament to our faith, and the responsibilities and natural instincts as mothers and as human beings with souls. We must believe in it.”<sup>20</sup> With as much truth, Agata might have said, “We’re embarking on a parable.” The necessary soul-making journey is implausible by any rational standards, and yet this is precisely what becoming parable means: it enacts the paradox of the more-than-human taking human form and movement. In *Women Talking*, it entails the implausibility of women who have been stranded between animality and humanity discerning the urgency of becoming “God for [themselves] so that [they] can be divine for the other.”<sup>21</sup> A feminist parable, theirs is a leave-taking, informed by the infinite horizon of the Godhead, that daringly reworks the metaphorical story of prodigality.

The journey of the biblical prodigal son away from home might be understood as a squandering of kinship ties in order to indulge in excessive acts of self-gratification that falsely promise sovereignty. As Toews reenvision the tale, the prodigal is no singular youth but rather a plurality of community men whose unrestrained, selfenslaving lusts have devastated kin and deformed what was meant to be a pacifist community into a place of violent licentiousness and the abjection of the defenceless. The novel as well as historical reports of the Manitoba Bolivia colony divulge that entire households were sprayed with an anesthetic meant for veterinary use on cows and that women and children awakened to pain, nausea, vaginal pain, blood, smeared manure, rope burns, and ripped clothing.<sup>22</sup> Accused of “wild female imagination,” suspected of adultery, and charged with Satanic ghost rapes (presumably for their sins), they were, to say the least,

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19 Crossan, *Power of Parable*, 47.

20 Toews, *Women Talking*, 164.

21 Irigaray, “Divine Women,” 71.

22 Toews, *Women Talking*, 4, 19, 57. See also Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, “The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia,” *VICE*, 22 December 2013, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/4w7gcj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8/](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7gcj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8/).

stigmatized.<sup>23</sup> Given such horrific abandonment of a peace practice, the women's leave-taking of the colony signals a paradoxical and parabolic act of *returning* to lived faith as a homeland. Leaving and returning, loss and restoration, human and divine—these meet at the limits of the fathomable

**Toews envisions women who acquire the courage to become divine, to undertake a reparative passage to an unknown horizon, beckoned by a forgiving, loving, incarnate God.**

to create new horizons of gendered and communal becoming. Moving extravagantly, implausibly beyond the terrors of patriarchal power dynamics, the women accept responsibility for incarnating a God of love and healing, a God of, in, and among the feminine. They discern that though they are bruised, terrified, infected, and insane, they must enact the messianic for themselves and for their children. And, in true parabolic form, this enactment involves the mun-

dane: the packing of food, the readying of children, and the slow movement by horse and buggy into the unknown world.

The events recounted in *Women Talking*, of course, did not happen in the Bolivian Mennonite colony. Rather, the novel, like biblical parables, provocatively redefines the possible when hope replaces fearful subordination to a violent patriarchy and to a punitive God created in its image. Toews, echoing feminist theologians, envisions women who acquire the courage to become divine, to undertake a reparative passage to an unknown horizon, beckoned by a forgiving, loving, incarnate God.

### **About the author**

Grace Kehler is associate professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Her work on the Victorians' vexed relations with the physical and the evolutionary provides a lively complement to her recent explorations of the affective and traumatic dimensions of Manitoba Mennonite writing. Recent publications include articles on Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*, *Swing Low*, and *A Complicated Kindness*.

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23 Toews, *Women Talking*, 57–58.

# Love in the wake of violence

Wilma Derksen

Life was brought down to its simplest form when our daughter went missing and was found murdered.

I had only one verse that saw me through the first year: “There are three things that remain—faith, hope and love—and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13, TLB).

Whenever I was asked to talk about my faith and share my stories, I always referred to this verse. When you are on your knees and there is nothing left, there are three things we need: faith in God; hope that everything would work out—here or in the afterlife; and love.



**Fear isn't easily recognized. Often, I have asked my clients if they are afraid. Inevitably they shake their heads. But if I ask them if they might have PTSD or anger management problems, they much more readily admit to those.**

Love was the hardest.

I could not believe how much our world had changed overnight. We were suddenly facing real demons and mental health issues. The biggest demon was definitely fear.

We didn't know it at the time, but fear underlined everything we were experiencing.

Fear isn't easily recognized. Often, I have asked my clients if they are afraid.

Inevitably they shake their heads. But if I ask them if they might have PTSD or anger management problems, they much more readily admit to those. Yet all of it is fear driven. A psychologist once told me that it is really all about fear—fear underlines everything.

In addition, research shows that the average person will feel some degree of fear and frustration ten to fourteen times a day.

So all of life, in its simplest form, is about love and fear.

But before I continue, I do want to say that not all fear is dysfunctional. Fear can be an empowering emotion in normal circumstances. However, in the extreme, it will incapacitate and disorient victims of serious crime. This massive new fear can cause panic attacks, which is fear gone wild. It is fear of fear.

I could not believe the fear-based issues that we were faced with.

In my desperation to understand this new world of issues, I joined a support group of parents of murdered children—people of like experience. There I could watch the issues play themselves out. I started to organize all the symptoms of trauma that I was seeing in the group of like experience, which I have listed in many ways, talked about, and written down.

**Violence robs crime victims of control of their lives. The resulting chaos can disturb the inner controls of victims' minds and sense of time to the point where they think they are going crazy. There is tremendous fear in losing control.**

In this article, I thought I might explore them again, but this time with the lens of fear.

First of all, violence causes us to lose our ability to put words to what has happened to us. Our inside voice, which we often call our narrator, is confused—our story is fragmented. The underlying fear is that my narrator is now telling me a

story of failure. It no longer holds hope. Failure is frightening. I am told that the word that can incite a prison revolt is “loser.”

I had to let go of my grief, move on, smile, and learn to laugh again. However, since the grieving process is one of vulnerability, pain, and sadness, it is common for the victim who is already feeling unsafe to want to avoid this process. We are afraid to separate ourselves from our loved one.

Violence robs crime victims of control of their lives. The resulting chaos can disturb the inner controls of victims' minds and sense of time to the point where they think they are going crazy. There is tremendous fear in losing control.

The criminal violation of society's moral code and social contract call into question the order and control of the entire universe and the creator of that universe. Losing faith in God creates a new fear of death and the afterlife.

Stigmatization resulting from the tendency of society to blame the victim can also cause the victim to question his or her identity, status, and worth. I had to let go of the old me and make peace with my new identity, allowing some doors to shut while walking through the new doors and opportunities opening to me. There is tremendous loss of social equity in becoming a victim—the fear of losing status resulting in social anxiety.

When there is no immediate justice, there is a fear of lawlessness. The whole world can turn hostile. Criminals are dangerous. The first instinct is to identify the primary cause of the harm and blame it. Who is it?

Yet placing responsibility for a murder has huge ramifications—as we discovered in our ten-year trial process. Then there is the fear of taking responsibility for one’s actions. There is fear of misplaced blame and guilt and the consequences of that. We expect the guilty to repay for the loss. How does that happen in murder?

There is a fear of the unknown that conflicts with an obsession to know the truth.



**There is the fear of vulnerability and helplessness. How do I protect my other children? How do I protect the vulnerable in our society? This fear can feel like righteous anger when it is expressed—except that any rage that parades as goodness can be a force of destruction like no other.**

There is also the fear of vulnerability and helplessness. How do I protect my other children? How do I protect the vulnerable in our society? This fear can feel like righteous anger when it is expressed—except that any rage that parades as goodness can be a force of destruction like no other.

Ultimately all crime is about broken societal relationships. The more violent the crime, the more difficult it is to reestablish a relationship of trust. There is always a fear of the enemy, any person who presents him or herself as a bully.

There is a suspicion of authority—especially when it is flawed. So, when an organization offers to oversee and control

a violent act, there is tremendous fear that they might not be able to handle it. We view systems with suspicion.

Eventually I had to let go of the hope of all reconciliation, which leaves with me with an unresolved conflict. Conflict creates stress and tension, to have no hope of recovery creates a new set of fears. I will never feel safe again. Yet, fear creates a prison with invisible bars.

For me, there was also the fear that we would never have closure. I had chosen a daring, vulnerable position. I had chosen love. I was never sure, especially in the early stages, if love really could overcome evil.

Actually, I don’t remember any one critical moment when I made an astounding choice to forgive or to love.

Often it was only a shift of the eyes: I will not focus on *that*; I will let *that* go and focus on something positive, something loving, and some-

**Love frees us from the dysfunction of fear. If we want to choose love over fear as a lifestyle, we don't have to wait for a violent act. We can simply choose to use all our fears as triggers for goodness and love.**

thing that feels like God. It was in the tiny decisions to be creative rather than ruminate. It was that switch in the brain.

Now in hindsight I believe more than ever the simple theological premise: "We need have no fear of someone who loves us perfectly; his perfect love for us eliminates all dread of what he might do to us. If we are afraid, it is for fear of what he might do to us and shows that we are not fully convinced that he really loves us" (1 John 4:18, TLB). Or as I remember it: "Perfect love casts out fear."

Love frees us from the dysfunction of fear. If we want to choose love over fear as a lifestyle, we don't have to wait for a violent act. We can simply choose to use all our fears as triggers for goodness and love.

### **About the author**

Wilma Derksen is best known for her work in victimization due to the murder of her daughter, but her real passion has always been to be known as an author. Ever since she penned her first sentence in public school she has been a closet writer with a novel in her bottom drawer. It was this writing passion that helped her find expression for her grief. She is a graduate of Creative Communication from Red River Community College, worked as a Western Regional Editor for ten years, authored six books regarding trauma and murder, and published two historical novels. Now as a Certified Executive Coach, she is using her coaching opportunities to help others find the story within themselves. She is developing a curriculum for "Writing your life story" and creating self-publishing support through Amity Publishers. She is also presently a pastor at Maplecrest Church in Winnipeg.

# Surely I am with you always

Steve Bell

As a young boy already, I noticed that often in the Bible, whenever an angel appeared to a person and said, “Do not be afraid,” the person was likely to soon encounter terrifying or heartbreaking things. And I secretly harboured the thought that if angels were to be more truthful, they should rather say, “Be afraid; be very, very afraid.”

Jesus too, I noticed, told his disciples more than once to not be afraid. And many of them went on to die violently, having suffered terrible hardships,



**Whenever an angel appeared to a person and said, “Do not be afraid,” the person was likely to soon encounter terrifying or heartbreaking things.**

rejection, and aloneness—the very things that reasonable people are reasonably afraid of.

The angel Gabriel’s encounter with Mary (Luke 26–38) is one particularly dramatic example of my childhood misgivings about scriptural consolations. God’s mighty angel startles the young girl with the news that she is to become the ark of the new covenant—that she is

to receive the seed of God, to harbour it in her womb, and to bear it forth for the sake of the world. It is a scene that is often serenely portrayed in art with delicate, radiant light and concordant colours. The English poet Malcolm Guite wrote a most astonishingly wonderful sonnet about the encounter, “Annunciation,” in his collection *Sounding the Seasons*:

*We see so little, stayed on surfaces,  
We calculate the outsides of all things,  
Preoccupied with our own purposes  
We miss the shimmer of the angel’s wings,  
They coruscate around us in their joy  
A swirl of wheels and eyes and wings unfurled,  
They guard the good we purpose to destroy,  
A hidden blaze of glory in God’s world.  
But on this day a young girl stopped to see  
With open eyes and heart. She heard the voice;  
The promise of His glory yet to be,*

*As time stood still for her to make a choice;  
Gabriel knelt and not a feather stirred,  
The Word himself was waiting on her word.*<sup>1</sup>

With those last two lines, the poet marvellously captures a pregnant and breathless moment where a broken cosmos awaits news of the beginning of its glorious recreation.

Such moments deserve great poems. However, something in me objects that unless more words were spoken than recorded, the young girl was not warned that this recreating would come at the cost of her son's life on a cruel instrument of state torture. The elder priest Simeon at least had the decency to warn her when, after rhapsodizing on the glorious salvation to come through this child, he lowered his eyes to Mary and told her that even so, a sword would

**I've only recently  
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*I will be with you*  
aren't far off.**

pierce her heart (Luke 2:21–35).

Be not afraid, indeed.

If *Be not afraid* is not a promise of exemption from frightening things, then what can it mean? I suspect the problem arises from our Western habit of lifting sacred texts from their context and then asking them to speak on their own. I've only recently noticed that, more often than not, when the words *Be not afraid* are spoken, the words *I will be with you* aren't far off. And although they aren't present in Gabriel's encounter with Mary, one of the ancient prophetic names for the child she was to bear was Emmanuel, or God *with Us*.

And here a personal story comes to mind.

Once, when my daughter Sarah was the tender age of five or so years, I was in charge of taking care of her through an evening while my wife was out. I was careful to put her to bed at the usual time of 7:30, not because I was typically careful of such things but because my favorite television show (reruns of *Kojak*) was on at 8:00. So we accomplished the bedtime ritual efficiently, and I kissed her good night and went happily into the TV room across the hallway to await the show to start.

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Guite, "Annunciation," in *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012).

It was only fifteen minutes or so into the episode when I heard Sarah crying. I quickly dashed across the hall to see what was causing her tears and discovered that she was terribly afraid—of the dark, of robbers, of whatever childhood terror one might imagine. We talked for a while about the unlikelihood of anyone breaking in, and how, even if it did happen, I was right across the hallway and would be able to protect her.



**In John’s first epistle, he makes the claim that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). And love, Christianly understood anyway, is the giving of the self for the flourishing of the other.**

We negotiated keeping the hall light on and the doors open so she could hear me and I her. I reassured her of her safety and with a kiss returned to my show.

Twenty minutes later saw a repeat of the same thing. This time the crying was louder, and it was harder to calm her down. But I managed to do so and again returned to my show.

Then, just as my show was coming to a dramatic climax, the wailing started up again, more intensely than the first two times. Frustrated and just a little desperate to not miss the show’s ending, I said possibly the most shameful thing I’ve said to any of my children: “Sarah! Honey! Jesus loves you and nothing bad is going to happen.”

She turned her anxious, tear-smearing face to mine and softly asked, “Does that mean he doesn’t love the children that *do* get hurt?”

In John’s first epistle, he makes the claim that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). And love, Christianly understood anyway, is the giving of the self for the flourishing of the other. So I finally did what I should have done in the first place. I turned off the TV and crawled in beside my beloved daughter and held her until she fell asleep.

\*\*\*

Are you afraid?

I am.

I am afraid of many, many things. Some of them are quite likely to come to pass. I’m afraid of economic hardship. I’m afraid of climate change. I’m afraid of Trumpism and social collapse. I’m afraid of terrorism and terrorists—those who don’t covet my stuff but do covet my terror. I’m afraid of physical pain and humiliation while I am watching my par-

ents suffer the ravages of old age. I'm afraid of disease and loss. I'm afraid I haven't loved sufficiently. I could go on.

And so, I pray. But I no longer pray as I used to—that God will exempt me and my beloved from the many unwelcomed things that are surely go-

**I pray in order to get to that place deep inside me, that place that is unfractured by anxieties, that is seamless and serene, that is calm and collected—that place where I know in my marrow that God is Emmanuel: with me, and I with him. There, and only there, I am unafraid and at rest.**

ing to come to pass. I pray in order to get to that place deep inside me, that place that is unfractured by anxieties, that is seamless and serene, that is calm and collected—that place where I know in my marrow that God is Emmanuel: with me, and I with him. There, and only there, I am unafraid and at rest. The more I can manage to find myself there, the more I can live in a broken world as Christ did—in shalomic solidarity with all of creation until all of creation is restored to its intended glory.

I am writing this while visiting my daughter and her family. This morning I asked Sarah for a Bible so I could look up a passage or two that I wanted to refer to. The Bible she brought me was one

she's had from since her youth. I read several passages, including the exchange between Gabriel and Mary and the Song of Simeon, both found in the first chapters of Luke's Gospel. I suddenly remembered Jesus's last words to his disciples before ascending to the right hand of God. I found them at the very end of Matthew's Gospel. And tears came as I read the words she underlined many years ago: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:20).

Fear not, indeed.

### **About the author**

Steve Bell is an award-winning singer, songwriter, and author who lives with his wife, Nanci, in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 Territory and home of the Red River Métis Nation.

# Diary of an urban pastor

Carrie Badertscher

## June 26

My heart skipped a beat as I answered the phone from my bedside table. After ministering in the city for several years, I had learned that it was seldom a good thing to receive a call after midnight. This time was no different. I recognized the number but not the voice on the other side. It was heavy with breath—short, shallow breaths. Words were hard to make out, and the tone and cadence were shaky and rushed.

“Can you come get the baby? They said they are coming back with a gun! Can you come get the baby?”

As quickly as the call came in, it ended. The silence on the other end meant that I would have no additional information and would have to act on what I did know. I put on my shoes, threw a car seat in the van, and headed out the door. Within minutes I arrived at the house from which the call came. The front door swung open and out came a teenager holding an infant. With hurried steps and fearful eyes that darted from left to right, she ran to the van and placed the baby boy in the car seat, hugged me as if it was the last hug I would receive from her, and then ran back toward the house, yelling at me to drive away.

## July 3

I arrived at the hospital room at the same time the doctors were making rounds. I was not prepared to see the number of wires and machines that were hooked up to such a small, newborn baby boy who was barely clinging to life. Earlier that day this baby boy’s parents were told that this day would most likely be his last. They called and asked me to come and provide pastoral support as they said good-bye to their son. Doctors had run out of ideas, machines were not providing enough support, and a decision needed to be made. Palliative care entered into the sacred space and provided answers to the questions that were only being asked silently in the mind. Within minutes of the palliative care team exiting the room, this baby boy’s mama collapsed in my arms, and for several minutes, maybe hours, she cried the deepest, most painful cry I have ever heard. At times in her lament, she would cry out intelligible words of fear for what would

happen next, what her baby would experience if she removed the tubes, and what life would be like without him.

### October 5

The knock on the door was loud and persistent. It was too dark to make out who was standing on the porch, but the reality of my children wak-

**There stood a junior high girl we had come to know well. Her eyes were red and full of tears. I invited her in, wondering all the while what had caused the fear that was so evident on her face. It was then that I saw them— welts, on her face, on her arms, down her legs.**

ing up from the loud knocks propelled me to open the door just as quickly as I could. There stood a junior high girl we had come to know well. Her eyes were red and full of tears. I invited her in, wondering all the while what had caused the fear that was so evident on her face. It was then that I saw them—welts, on her face, on her arms, down her legs. She proceeded to tell me that she had been injured at the hands of her mother and she could not return home. When the police officer and on-call Child Protective Services worker arrived that night, it was as if this young girl left her body. Her eyes appeared blank as she followed each instruction and answered yes or no

to each question. Her body seemed to react involuntarily when she was told that, because there was not enough physical evidence of abuse, she would be returning back home that very night.

### May 7

It was as if there were a hundred people screaming in the background when I answered the phone on that Friday afternoon. I couldn't make sense of what was being said or who was saying it. Through the cries of small children, I could faintly make out an address and the request to come. I typed in the address and began navigating to the location, unaware of what or whom I would find. I pulled up to a house that was unfamiliar but saw a car that was owned by a youth I knew well. Inside her car were four small children, barely dressed, with faces stained with tears. The young woman quickly got out of her car and fell into my arms. She had seemingly kept her emotions in check until we embraced, and now she could barely find the strength to stand. With very few words exchanged,

she shared that there was just a drive-by shooting at her home while the kids were playing outside and that her brother had been shot twice and was en route to the hospital. The kids in her car needed a safe place to go, as her house was now a crime scene. I loaded the visibly shaken children into my van, and we headed to my home. Blank stares and silence seemed to permeate the cinderblock walls of my basement. These young children, later joined by their older siblings, spent the weekend away from windows and doors and snuggled in large blankets as they tried to make sense of what their mind, bodies, and hearts had just experienced.

### January 12

He walked into the visitation room in a blue jumpsuit, hands firmly connected behind the small of his back. He was ushered in by a man with a gun tucked into a holster on his belt. I felt my face become warm



**With tears in his eyes, he shared his own fears about being tried as an adult. At sixteen years old, he could stand before a judge in adult court and face the next forty years to life in a state penitentiary.**

and my heart beat a little faster. It had been eighteen months since I had seen this young man, eighteen months since he had been at the wrong place at the wrong time, eighteen months since he had taken the life of another and had gone into hiding. We spent the next ninety minutes chatting about days of the past and laughing about the funny things he did as a child. He talked about his cravings for my homemade Sloppy Joes and repeatedly told me everything would be OK when my eyes would well

up with tears. Then, with tears in his eyes, he shared his own fears about being tried as an adult. At sixteen years old, he could stand before a judge in adult court and face the next forty years to life in a state penitentiary. He was fully aware that if convicted, because he is not yet eighteen years old, he could spend the next two years of life in solitary confinement.

### Reflecting on fear

Fear has a sound. It has an appearance. It has a presence.

I have heard it in the voice of a young woman locked in a home against her will but unsure of where she was or how to tell me how to get to her. I have seen it in the face of a young mother who just found out she was pregnant with her fourth child in four years but knew she didn't

have the means to bring another child into the world. I have felt it deep within my own chest as I held my foster child, knowing full well that at any moment she could be taken away. Settings, characters, and stories may

**I recently had an individual ask me how I deal with the fear I have felt and seen while living in the city, ministering to neighbors. My answer is that with every fiber of my being, I believe that God is with me, working to redeem even the most fear-filled, broken moments.**

change, but the deep-seated grip of fear crosses all lines of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. It is real and overwhelming.

I recently had an individual ask me how I deal with the fear I have felt and seen while living in the city, ministering to neighbors. They wanted to know how I continue to answer the phone and walk through the hard moments. I didn't know how to answer in the moment, but after much processing and prayer, it has become much more clear to me. My answer is that with every fiber of my being, I believe that God is with me, working to redeem even the most fear-filled, broken moments. God's presence

makes me brave. God's presence enables my neighbors to rise in the midst of panic and despair. God's presence makes the giants fall. I have seen it with my own eyes—when God stands off with fear, fear bows. God's presence changes everything.

I wish that I could say that every story came with a happy ending—that God intervened in palpable ways, changing even the circumstances and situation, as with the Israelites and the Red Sea as the Egyptian chariots were in full charge. That has not been my experience. More often than not, for many of my neighbors and friends, the battle rages on. I cannot offer them a life without fear, but I can offer them a God who will enter into times of fear with them. I can offer them a hope that stretches far beyond what they see. I can offer them a peace that confuses fear itself. I can offer myself as a steady companion in their time of fear and grief.

### **About the author**

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# “Be not afraid”

## An essay for my mom and other worried parents

Melanie A. Howard

It’s only 7:30 a.m., but my phone has already dinged with a text message. “Are you OK? I haven’t heard from you yet today,” my mom has texted. I chuckle and type back, “Yes, I’m fine. I’ll e-mail soon.”

I may be in my early thirties, but if I have not sent my standard morning e-mail in a timely fashion, I can expect to receive some version of this



**The biblical text preserves several instances of parents and parents-to-be receiving the message, “Do not be afraid.” Yet, in a modern world where it seems that the ways for a child to come to harm are proliferating, it may be difficult to know how to receive such a message.**

message ensuring my health and safety. I have begun to learn that my numerical age has no relation to my mother’s ability to worry about me, her only child.

The biblical text preserves several instances of parents and parents-to-be receiving the message, “Do not be afraid.” Yet, in a modern world where it seems that the ways for a child to come to harm are proliferating, it may be difficult to know how to receive such a message. After briefly surveying the parents throughout the Bible who are told not to be afraid, I suggest here that Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1 may offer anxious parents a model for how to respond to their worries about children. So, to my

mom and to all parents who have ever worried about a child, this essay is for you.

### Fearful parents in the Old Testament

Parents fill the pages of Bible from nearly the beginning (Adam and Eve in Genesis 4) to the end (the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12). Likewise, parents in both the Old and New Testament receive exhortations not to fear.

The Old Testament preserves two such commands to parents to abstain from fear. One instance is in 1 Samuel 4:19–22. Upon receiving the news of her husband’s death and the defeat of Israel, Phineas’s wife

**In this moment of reckoning with the possibility of her child’s death, Hagar receives the angelic instruction not to be afraid. She is provided with the reassurance that God intends to make her child into a great nation, and this promise proves sufficient to sustain her.**

is shocked into a labor and delivery that costs her her life. However, just before she succumbs to death, her birth attendants attempt to cheer her by telling her not to be afraid because she has borne a son. Evidently, she is to find solace in taking a long-range view of time in which her own death will be put into proper perspective by the fact that she has brought a son into the world.

The other exhortation to a parent in the Old Testament appears quite early in the Old Testament narrative, just a few chapters into Genesis where Hagar perceives a heavenly voice calling her not to be afraid even in the face of a dying child (Gen. 21:17). This episode is particularly

heart wrenching. Hagar has been sent against her will to be raped by the man who owns her. She is forced to birth and to raise the son who was conceived by that act. Then, when the woman who owns her feels threatened, Hagar is sent with only the most meager provisions to fend for herself and her young child in the wilderness. When the provisions are depleted, Hagar abandons the child beneath the protection of a bush and turns aside so as not to witness the death of her own son. It is in this moment of reckoning with the possibility of her child’s death that Hagar receives the angelic instruction not to be afraid. She is provided with the reassurance that God intends to make her child into a great nation (Gen. 21:18), and this promise proves sufficient to sustain her.

### **Fearful parents in the New Testament**

The command to parents to avoid fear permeates the New Testament as well. Some variant of the phrase “do not be afraid” or “do not fear” appears roughly twenty-four times throughout the New Testament, and of these, five are directed specifically to parents or parents-to-be. Given the limited use of the phrase overall, the identification of this particular audience is striking.

The first appearance of the phrase “do not be afraid” occurs within the first chapter of the New Testament as Joseph is assured by an angel that he should not be frightened to take the steps that will lead to his



**One of the common messages to parents throughout the New Testament is not to be afraid. In most of these cases, the cause for possible parental fear is left unarticulated. Fear for health, social honor, or overall wellbeing could all be in the background.**

parenting of Jesus (Matt. 1:20). Luke’s account, though focused on Mary, includes a similar exhortation to a parent-to-be to avoid fear as Mary embarks upon her impending pregnancy (Luke 1:30). Luke sets up this pronouncement with a similar declaration made to Zechariah as he receives news of his own upcoming fatherhood (Luke 1:13). Finally, in both Mark’s (5:36) and Luke’s (8:50) account of the healing of Jairus’s daughter, Jesus discourages Jairus from being fearful about his presumably dead daughter’s well being.

In short, one of the common messages to parents throughout the New Testament is not to be afraid. In most of these cases, the cause for possible parental fear is left unarticulated. Fear for health, social honor, or overall wellbeing could all be in the background. Indeed, the more generic statement “Do not be afraid,” rather than a more specific injunction, “Do not worry about \_\_\_\_\_” could be intentional. Such a generic statement might be aimed at ensuring that all possible causes for parental fear are simultaneously acknowledged and subsumed under God’s care.

### **A mother’s fear and the Magnificat**

Despite these many encouragements to parents in the Bible not to be afraid, I would like to focus not on these words themselves but on the response of one parent who received this message: Mary and her song of praise. The Gospel of Luke recounts the angelic revelation to Mary concerning her pregnancy and impending birth (1:26–38). Shortly following this pronouncement, Mary embarks on a journey to visit her relative, Elizabeth, and in the context of the meeting, Mary bursts forth into the prayer of praise known to us today as the Magnificat (1:46–55).

This prayer celebrates the social upheavals and radical reversals that are present in God’s work. Mary proclaims, “[The Mighty One] has scat-

tered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51b–53). These words celebrate the Reign of God in which those who were previously oppressed have new opportunities. The text is rich in hope for the poor and the marginalized.

However, we might ask why such a prayer appears here of all places. What is it about these early days of pregnancy that inspires such words in Mary? Has a hormone surge sparked previously unknown poetic abilities? Or is there, perhaps, a different motivation that underlies this sudden poetry?

### **The Magnificat in historical context**

Luke does not explain what inspires Mary’s spontaneous speech. Nonetheless, one might wonder whether it might not have something to do with her sudden realization about what it means to bring a child into the world, specifically *this* child and *this* world. Living under the thumb of the occupying Roman Empire, Mary would have likely been well aware of the realities for Jewish peasants living under these imperial forces.

After a brief period of Jewish rule under the Hasmoneans, the region of Galilee was swept back under Roman rule with the Roman General Pompey’s conquest in 63 BCE. Just a few miles up the road from Nazareth, the large town of Sepphoris was requisitioned as a center for Roman power in the area. While Luke does not provide details of Mary’s backstory, it is not unlikely that this Roman grab for power close to home would have been a story that Mary heard from parents or grandparents for whom this takeover was a part of their living memory.

With this background in mind, Gabriel’s words to Mary may sound rather different. Gabriel predicts that Mary’s son will receive David’s throne and “will reign over the house of Jacob forever. . . . Of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32–33). How would this sound to Mary who, as a girl, may have heard stories from her family of the way that Jewish rulers in the city just up the road were deposed by Roman forces? Would she readily embrace this unexpected angelic promise, or would she be apprehensive about what such a political future might mean for her unborn son? Given the realities of human nature, I have to imagine that at least a bit of the latter possibility would have been present.

How, then, do we hear the words of the Magnificat? Could they be motivated by fear? Although Gabriel’s speech to Mary was prefaced by the

exhortation, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:30), one could easily excuse Mary for being anxious about the social shame that she might incur as a result of her pregnancy or the future safety of her child within a dangerous sociopolitical milieu.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it was this place of uneasiness that led to her erupting into this prayer. Perhaps her words here are as much a proclamation of God’s great work as they are a personal reassurance that injustice and oppression cannot finally prevail.

### **The Magnificat: A faithful response to parental fear?**

Given Mary’s situation, one might expect her speech to focus on the many direct issues at hand related to her pregnancy. However, rather than focusing her attention on the immediate concerns, Mary directs her words to short, declarative statements of what she knows to be true of God’s work of justice and God’s character in commitment to the downtrodden. It is notable that every verb in the Magnificat for which God is the implied subject is in the aorist tense, the Greek verbal tense for simple past action.<sup>2</sup> Mary’s theology, then, is not built out of lofty schemas or complex doctrines. Rather, it is a series of assertions: God did *this*. God did *that*. For whatever fears Mary might have from the microcosmic perspective of being a mother, she addresses these fears through a macrocosmic approach of naming God’s actions against systemic injustices and oppression.

Mary’s inclination in the Magnificat to direct her attention not to the immediate fears of her present situation but to God’s larger work in the world is a perspective that is later echoed in her own son’s teachings.

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1 Beyond this, it is also important to remember that by most dating estimates, Luke is penning this narrative after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. As Richard W. Swanson observes, “Luke’s story is told in the smoldering aftermath of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome, a revolt that failed miserably” (“Magnificat and Crucifixion: The Story of Mariam and her Son,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, no. 2 [April 2007]: 107). Thus, even as Luke recounts one character’s possible method of dealing with fear, Luke himself may be similarly attempting to deal with fear or anxiety.

2 Additionally, John T. Carroll observes that these verbs generally appear “in emphatic first position in each clause” (*Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 48). Thus, the syntax may also be suggesting an emphasis on these simple past actions from God. I. Howard Marshall, however, finds this use of the past tense to be a “problem” because of his suspicion that God’s actions as described in the Old Testament are not in the immediate context here. Marshall, rather, suggests, “What God has now begun to do, and Mary regards prophetically as having already come to fruition, is described in terms of what God actually did in OT times, as expressed in Israel’s praise in the OT” (*The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 84).

In Luke 12:22–31, Jesus likewise encourages a perspective that focuses on God’s macrocosmic work. Jesus exhorts his audience to seek God’s kingdom (12:31) because such a search not only will result in achieving a reality of peace and justice but will also take care of the logistical details of life such as what to eat or what to wear (12:22). Even as Jesus encourages a long-range view of reality, he likewise suggests that God’s work is so enmeshed with the details of life that even birds and plants are not outside of God’s purview (12:24, 28).

### **Comfort for anxious parents**

The Magnificat, as Mary’s response to potentially alarming news, may offer a helpful model for fearful parents today. Parental fears can be vast, ranging from concern for getting proper nutrition to surviving deadly diseases, from coming home on time to thriving in life with a disability, from getting a good grade on a test to avoiding unjust racially biased violence, and from going to bed on time to discovering meaning in life. Some fears may be irrational, others deeply rooted in dangerous realities. Perhaps

**Mary’s response to whatever fears she may have had was rooted in her observations of God’s inclination toward justice for the oppressed.**

the same was true of Mary’s own apprehensions as she approached the task of mothering a child who faced a hazardous world.

Nonetheless, Mary’s response to whatever fears she may have had was rooted in her observations of God’s inclination toward justice for the oppressed.<sup>3</sup> Would her son survive the power of the Roman Empire? She did

not know, but she could declare that God “showed strength” (Luke 1:51). Would her child have any chance of inheriting the throne of David, as the angel promised her? She could not be certain, but she could proclaim that God “brought down the powerful from their thrones” (1:52). Would God help her in the ordeal to come? She could not see the future, but she could assert that God “helped his servant Israel” (1:54). Mary’s simple, declarative theology sets whatever fears she had in the context of God’s historical work for God’s people.

<sup>3</sup> One might be reminded of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s proclamation that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

A look toward the long-range perspective of God's work of justice will probably not stop my mom from sending me a text message when



**I pray that these moments of fear and anxiety may serve as a reminder that the work of God in the macrocosm of the universe is far greater than these concerns of the microcosm, even as God's great, macrocosmic work contains this microcosm as well.**

I have not contacted her soon enough one morning. But here is my prayer for her and for the many parents who worry about children in so many ways: I pray that these moments of fear and anxiety may serve as a reminder that the work of God in the macrocosm of the universe is far greater than these concerns of the microcosm, even as God's great, macrocosmic work contains this microcosm as well. Parental worries need not be trivialized, but they can be contextualized in light of a great God who parents the whole world. My hope is that in every moment when my parent, or any parent, finds herself worrying about a child, she will take that worry as a reminder

of God's great provisions, even in the darkest of times. For every daughter who has stayed up past her bedtime to every son who is struggling with a disability, I pray that there would be a parent encountering those moments as reminders of God's care for the lowly, the humble, and the oppressed.

### **About the author**

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Melanie and her husband, Jeremiah, are active members of Willow Avenue Mennonite Church in Fresno, California.

# The walls of our hearts

## A reflection on Luke 7:36–50

Perdian Tumanan

### The purpose of walls

In Indonesia, houses usually have fences or walls. People erect them to protect their house from potential external threats. However, the question is, Do fences or walls protect the house from those threats if they are coming?

I never forget one story that happened in 2015. A big house in an elite real estate area with high walls was robbed. Ironically, it was not because the robbers could climb the high walls. The robbers infiltrated their friend through a domestic servant channeling agency, which provides housemaids mostly for elite families.<sup>1</sup> This story and many other

similar stories make me rethink the purpose of fences or walls again. If they never assure the certainty of our protection, then what are they for?

Texas Tech University philosopher Costica Bradatan, reflecting on the collapsed of the Berlin Wall and how many people there still feel the division, says this is because the wall is not just about the physical structure. It is mostly about our human mentality. He writes, “Walls are built not for security but for a sense of

security.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than build the wall for the outsiders that are perceived as threats, people build the wall to protect them from their fears.



**Walls separate us from reality with all its beauty, challenges, and opportunities. The higher and thicker the walls we make, the more limited is our view to recognize the reality out there.**

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1 Mei Amelia R, “Jadi Buronan, Ini Pembantu Yang Ikut Merampok Rumah Mewah Di Kebon Jeruk,” *detiknews*, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3085316/jadi-buronan-ini-pembantu-yang-ikut-merampok-rumah-mewah-di-kebon-jeruk>.

2 Costica Bradatan, “Scaling the ‘Wall in the Head,’” *Opinionator*, November 27, 2011, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/scaling-the-wall-in-the-head/>.

However, there is another danger from the wall: it separates us from reality with all its beauty, challenges, and opportunities. Our interpretation of those realities heavily relies on our own experiences inside the wall. The higher and thicker the walls we make, the more limited is our view to recognize the reality out there. In his famous allegory of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic*, Plato illustrates this situation as prisoners that are trapped in a cave since their birth and never see realities outside the cave. As a result, they cannot differentiate shadow from reality. They even reject someone from among them who managed to get out of the cave and return to tell them that all that they perceive is just their perception. The ultimate irony is found in the last part of the conversation, when Socrates asks, “And if they can get hold of this person who takes it in hand to free them from their chains and to lead them up, and if they could kill him, will they not actually kill him?” Glaucon answers him, “They certainly will.”<sup>3</sup>

### The wall of prejudice

Since the wall is not just about a physical structure but is mainly about what is happening in our mind and perception, “the wall” here could be anything that efficiently produces prejudice against and stereotyping of those outside our circle. The wall could be manifested in identity exclusivity, cultural superiority, and even religious claims. As Christians, our dogmatic beliefs often draw a strict demarcation line between the sinners and the saints, outsiders and insiders, the chosen and the reprobate. Often our spiritual activities are merely efforts to strengthen and enhance the walls. We are used to labeling others that differ from us with various terms: liberal, progressive, evangelical, fundamentalist, conservative, and so on.

This is exactly what Luke does through the story of a sinful woman who anoints Jesus’s feet. From the beginning, Luke informs us of the identity gap between the two figures involved in the story—Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman—and highlights the contrast. The impression Luke leaves is one of high and thick walls between these two.

The word “Pharisee” likely derives from the Hebrew word *Parus*, which means “to divide,” “to separate,” or “to make distinct.”<sup>4</sup> This emphasizes

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3 Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave,” *Republic* 7.514.a.2–517.a.7, trans. Thomas Sheehan, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>.

4 Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 533.

the distinctiveness and specificity of this group in religious matters. Josephus, a Jewish historian, writes in his *Wars of the Jews* that the Pharisees were “the most accurate interpreters of the laws.”<sup>5</sup> The sinful woman’s identity, in contrast, is not clear. Her name is not mentioned. The only identifier for this woman is her moral corruptness. While it is unclear what causes this woman to be labeled a “sinner,” the phrase “publicly a sinner”<sup>6</sup> indicates that this woman has a reputation for doing depraved things. Interpreters tend to associate this woman’s sin with prostitution.<sup>7</sup>

### **Building bridges, not walls**

Luke highlights the unbridgeable identities of Simon and the sinful woman. While Simon represents a religious, esteemed, and commendable group, the sinful woman represents unclean and worthless people. Luke tells us that these two figures met on one occasion because of Jesus (v. 37). Predictably, the Pharisee is disturbed. Verse 39 tells us something more surprising: the Pharisee is not only disturbed and anxious by the presence of the sinful woman but even more so by Jesus’s attitude toward the sinful woman.

At the time of their meeting, a controversy had arisen about the identity of Jesus, especially after he raised a young child in Nain (7:16). People began to conclude that Jesus was not just a teacher of the Torah; he was a great prophet sent by God. However, Simon the Pharisee was troubled. How can a prophet behave like Jesus? In the Old Testament, it is clear that the prophets are those who oppose sin and even destroy sinners. Prophets are YHWH’s envoys to define the firm line between sinners and saints. Here, Jesus seems blurred the line.

It is not easy to take a stance like Jesus’s, especially in the middle of our world today that is easily divided by identity issues. Doing what Jesus did is dangerous and controversial. Just look at what Jesus experiences in this passage. When he tries to be a bridge between the Pharisee and this woman, he is not only misunderstood; he is also judged and demeaned (v. 49).

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5 Louis H. Feldman, *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 241.

6 John Nolland, *Luke. 1–9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 35A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 350.

7 Nolland, *Luke. 1–9:20*, 353.

## Jesus as the bridge

In contrast to Simon, the sinful woman has a different attitude. Even though she was hurt by the community through the label that they gave to her, her fears and hatred do not conquer her heart. On the contrary, consciously and bravely, she solidifies her heart to step into Simon's house. As the renowned sinner in the city, this woman must be known by Si-



**Jesus's acceptance, love, and forgiveness break down the wall of suspicion and fear in the sinful woman. The woman's encounter with Jesus is at the same time a radical step to make peace with others—even with those who hate her.**

mon,<sup>8</sup> just as Simon, as a wealthy and famous Pharisee,<sup>9</sup> must also be known to this woman. We can conclude then this woman not only wants to meet Jesus. If she only wants to meet Jesus, why doesn't she meet him at another place that does not invite controversy? Stepping into Simon's house is risky and threatening.

That is precisely the purpose of her arrival. Her arrival is a revolutionary symbolic sign of an effort to bridge the gap between herself and the Pharisee. It is an effort of reconciliation, which the religious leaders failed to make but

which the sinful woman carries out. How is she able to do this? Because of Jesus! Commentators usually say this woman had already experienced forgiveness by Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Jesus's acceptance, love, and forgiveness break down the wall of suspicion and fear in her. There are no more insulating walls. The woman's encounter with Jesus is at the same time a radical step to make peace with others—even with those who hate her.

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8 Richard Bolling Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 232.

9 For Vinson, Luke's Pharisees were wealthy and powerful (*Luke*, 229).

10 Nolland, *Luke*. 1-9:20, 353.

# In the midst of the storm

Esther Epp-Tiessen

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.  
—Isaiah 43:1b–2a*

## A terrifying moment

We were out on the open water of the Bohol Sea. My husband, Dan, and I had been vacationing on a small island off the coast of Mindanao in the Philippines. During our three-day stay, a typhoon east of us made our vacation wet and windy. But as we set out to return home on day four, we thought the storm had passed and all would be well. No sooner were we out of harbour than we realized how wrong we were.

The small ferry boat was old and dilapidated. Even in the calmer water of the harbour, it listed badly. As we left the leeward side of the island, the remnants of the typhoon attacked with unrelenting fury. Massive four-metre waves tossed the boat about and threatened to capsize it. I sat on the wooden bench, clutching it as hard as I possibly could. Some ancient life jackets hung from a shelf at the front of the boat, but I was too terrified to stand up and get some. I imagined myself disappearing and drowning in the churning, heaving sea. I lamented that I would not be able to say farewell to Dan, who was sitting several rows behind me. I watched as my Filipino companions pulled out their rosaries and whispered their prayers.

Obviously, the ferry boat did not capsize, and we did not drown.<sup>1</sup> But the experience was the most terrifying in my life, and it imprinted itself in my body and on my psyche. When I think of fear, I often go back to that journey in the midst of the storm. I believe that this is why the first verses

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<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the question of whether God protected us and enabled our boat to reach safety. It has always been hard for me to answer that. A month prior to this experience, another typhoon capsized a much larger ferry with hundreds of passengers. Most of those passengers, including several church worker friends, drowned. I have no doubt that they prayed for God's protection.

of Isaiah 43 and the story of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4 eventually became so important to me.

### **Fear in the Philippines**

Dan and I were part-way through four years of service with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Mindanao, Philippines. These were amazingly transformative years, but they were also years when I experienced



**As a young and inexperienced twenty-something, I was afraid of being a failure. My fear and anxiety diminished as I got to know my neighbours, learned the language and the culture, and entered into the lives of the people around me.**

fear in its many forms. Some of those experiences, like the episode on the boat, were times when we were clearly in physical danger. For example, we frequently rode buses through the mountains, and oftentimes the buses lacked adequate brakes. It was not uncommon to see the carcasses of vehicles that had careened over roadside cliffs. Many people died because there weren't the resources to keep buses in good repair.

At other times, my fears were simply rooted in the anxiety of being in a context where everything was so different and unfamiliar. I worried about making

mistakes and being culturally insensitive, about being inadequate for the job, and about not being able to fill the huge shoes left by our MCC predecessors. As a young and inexperienced twenty-something, I was afraid of being a failure. My fear and anxiety diminished as I got to know my neighbours, learned the language and the culture, and entered into the lives of the people around me.

As time went on, I feared for friends and partners. A civil war was underway, with the military forces of dictator Ferdinand Marcos determined to crush the New People's Army (NPA), a people's armed struggle for justice and equality. Many of our Filipino friends were sympathetic to—if not directly involved in—the liberation struggle. Those who openly voiced resistance to or worked for the end of the Marcos regime, even through nonviolent means, were at great risk of arrest, torture, imprisonment, and even “salvaging” (the common term for the summary execution of opponents of the regime).

Several times we accompanied others searching for loved ones who had been disappeared, or we visited those who had been imprisoned.

Several times we saw bodies that had been brutally killed. Several times we visited communities that had been the sites of “encounters” between military forces and rebels. The blood, the bullet-ridden buildings, and the absolute silence—because all the people had either evacuated in fear or been forcibly displaced—were deeply unsettling.

But there was another kind of fear at work in the Philippines, not one that we felt personally but one that we witnessed. That was the manipulation of fear for political ends, or “the politics of fear.” Like many oppressive regimes around the world, President Marcos retained his power and his brutal hold on the country not only through military might but also through portraying himself as the one to ensure stability and security against existential threats. He proclaimed to be securing the nation from evil terrorists (equated with Muslims) and godless communists (associated with the NPA and its supporters). The strategy had considerable success. Whenever we travelled away from Mindanao—home to most of the Philippines’ Muslims as well as NPA supporters—we encountered disbelief that we could possibly live and work in such a seemingly dangerous place.

### **What I’ve learned about fear**

Many years have passed since our life-changing sojourn in the Philippines. In recent years, I have reflected more deeply on those formative experiences as well as my additional decades of work with MCC.<sup>2</sup> Here’s what I have learned about fear.

First, through my years with MCC, I have become sensitized to my privilege and how that privilege prevents me from experiencing the fear that many people live with constantly. My white skin, my education, my relative wealth, my heterosexual marriage—and the good fortune to live in Canada—ensure that fear and insecurity and trauma are not my daily fare. When I contemplate the lives of other members of my human family, my own fears pale in comparison. Privilege protects me from things that cause others indescribable fear and suffering. It also leads to comfort and complacency and keeps me from taking risks to diminish fear for others. A question that haunts me is how people of privilege resist the intoxication of comfort and complacency.

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2 In the course of writing this essay, I consulted several current and former MCC workers for wisdom arising out of their experiences of fear. I am grateful to the following for helping me flesh out my own learnings: Anna Johnson, Anna Vogt, Diana Epp-Fransen, Lois Coleman Neufeld, Mike Smith, and Valerie Smith.

Second, I have learned that context shapes one's understanding and experience of fear. I was never afraid of sexual assault in the rural Philippines, but I do carry those fears with me here in my own city of Winnipeg. A friend who served with MCC in Bosnia concurs. In Bosnia, she learned to fear the presence of landmines left from the war, but she never feared walking alone as a woman at night. It seems that, depending on the context, certain societies come to accept certain causes of fear as "normal." Canadian society—along with many other societies—has a high tolerance for violence against women, especially Indigenous women, but a very low tolerance for boats that are not sea-worthy or buses that are not in good repair. How do we learn to look at ourselves and our own society's blind spots?

Third, I have learned that much fear is about the unknown. I mentioned the impressions that northerner Filipinos had about the southern part of their country: they knew of it primarily as the home of violent



**The manipulation of fear can contribute to "othering." With sufficient media and political propaganda, people's fears of the unknown can be channelled in ways so as to marginalize, exclude, and dehumanize whole groups of people.**

terrorists and insurgents. And yet, most people living in the south went about their daily activities normally. When my MCC friends in Bosnia travelled to Northern Ireland to attend a peace-building conference, their Bosnian neighbours expressed concern that they would travel to such a dangerous place; yet their new friends in Northern Ireland expressed equal concern that they should be living and working in dangerous Bosnia. Another friend, serving with MCC in Palestine, shared that Palestinians sometimes wondered how she could live in the dangerous United

States! How do we build relationships and understanding so as to counter the stereotypes and distortions that can arise from fear of the unknown?<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, I have learned that the manipulation of fear can contribute to "othering." With sufficient media and political propaganda, people's fears of the unknown can be channelled in ways so as to marginalize,

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3 I believe that one of the most profound ways that MCC helps to build peace and understanding in the world is through the relationship building that happens as MCC workers and people in diverse global contexts become friends. The ripple effect of this bridge building has been largely undocumented.

exclude, and dehumanize whole groups of people. Elites prey on people's insecurities to create more fear and to legitimize political actions that will solidify their power and control over others. President Marcos used it in the Philippines in the 1980s; Donald Trump and others like him use it today. The "othering" that we witness in our world today—of Muslims, Mexicans, migrants and refugees, LGBTQ persons, and more—is a profound threat to global peace. How do we resist this manipulation and fear?

Fifth, I have learned that the Spirit of God enables people to act courageously despite their fear. For me, this is symbolized best in the story of my Filipina friend Jeannette (Jet). Jet was a human rights worker with the Catholic Church. She helped to document human rights violations, to visit political prisoners, and to search for the missing and disappeared. Given the context of the Philippines, hers was a very dangerous job. One time when she did not show up at a conference at the expected time, many of us began to imagine the worst. Jet eventually arrived well after midnight, and we welcomed her with celebration. But we also noticed the blood on her shoes. She explained that she had spent the day travelling from morgue to morgue with a family searching for their missing son. They had eventually found the young man's murdered body, lying on the floor of the last morgue, his blood running out onto the cold concrete. In moving closer to help identify the body, Jet had stepped into the blood.

Later on, I expressed my incredulity to her, marvelling that she could continue doing the work that also threatened her own safety and security. I remember her simple response: "How can I *not* do this work? How can I as a Christian *not* support the poor and the oppressed and work for justice and peace? How can I *not* resist the forces of oppression and injustice?"

Despite the risks and the fear, her faith demanded that she put her own life on the line in service of those who suffered. She acted despite her fear.

### **Courage in community**

Through Jet and others, I also learned that courage is contagious. Jet was part of a Christian community that met regularly to pray, to support one another, and to discern ways of faithfully resisting the dictatorship and bearing witness to God's reign of justice and peace. Jet could act with courage because she was not alone; she was one part of a community resisting together.

In subsequent years I have witnessed this "courage in community" elsewhere. In Gaza, Palestinian mothers, fathers, and young people cou-

rageously protest the crippling Israeli occupation and blockade that has made their life a prison; hundreds were killed in 2018 alone. In Syria, young Christians and Muslims deliver material resources in war zones, determined to help those in desperate need and to demonstrate the possibility of peaceful coexistence. In northwestern Guatemala, Mayan peasants protest a Canadian-owned gold mine that has torn the fabric of their community and devastated the earth and water. In Canada, Indigenous grandmothers defend their land from the dams, pipelines, and extractive industries that destroy their way of life and that of future generations. All of these communities of people are profound examples of those who are empowered to stand up for truth, justice, and righteousness despite their fear because they are not alone. I regularly remember this courageous cloud of witnesses, and I am strengthened.

### **Jesus calms the storm—and our fears**

I mentioned earlier the power of the story of Jesus calming the storm, found in Mark 4. As a young person, I read verses 35–41 as a stand-alone story. A sleeping Jesus and his disciples are out on the sea when a wind-storm arises and threatens to swamp the boat. The disciples are terrified and awaken Jesus, who seems not to care that they are perishing. Jesus rebukes the wind and chides the disciples (“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”), and all is calm. The moment of terror has passed. End of story.

But, no, the story is not over. Jesus and the disciples do not go home. In Mark 5, they continue on to the other side—their intended destination in the first place. The other side is not only a different side of the sea; for the Jewish disciples it is also the place of the feared “other.” It is a place of Gentiles and a place where Roman soldiers (from the occupying military force) are stationed. It is also home to the man Legion, whose name is an unmistakable reference to the Roman military legion. This man is so disturbed, troubled, and demon-filled that everyone is afraid of him. The storm on the sea is a prelude and perhaps even a premonition of the fearful things the disciples will encounter on the other side.

But on the other side, Jesus heals the feared man, removing the demons that make him a terror to others. Jesus sends the man home to his community, where he might once again find belonging. Jesus urges him to tell all that God has done for him. The disciples are witnesses to this miraculous transformation. A terrifying man becomes an ordinary hu-

man, and a place of “otherness” becomes the stage for profound healing and blessing.

We cannot do too much about a stormy sea. But we can help to diminish the fears that we create or harbour about one another. The story

**We do not overcome fear by fleeing or hiding from things that are unknown or from those we consider “other.” We do not overcome fear by surrounding ourselves with walls and weapons and with ideologies and practices of “othering.”**

from Mark teaches us that we do not overcome fear by fleeing or hiding from things that are unknown or from those we consider “other.” We do not overcome fear by surrounding ourselves with walls and weapons and with ideologies and practices of “othering.” We do not overcome fear alone. Indeed, perhaps we do not overcome fear at all. Perhaps the point of the story is simply that fear loses its power as we rely on Jesus’s presence with us, as we turn toward that which is fearful, and as we face it together in community, *en-courage*-ing and strengthening one another. Perhaps we never lose our

fear; rather, we find courage *despite* our fear. And who knows what blessing we may encounter on the other side.

I conclude with confession. I am a coward and believe that I always will be—especially on a stormy sea. I am also painfully aware of the irony of writing about nobly confronting fear while seated in the safety and security of my Winnipeg home. But I also believe that I am called to trust in the promise of Jesus’s presence, to love my neighbour (especially the unknown and frightening one), and to find strength in community. I believe that, somehow, God empowers the fearful—even me.

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;*

*and the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.*

## About the author

Esther Epp-Tiessen served with MCC for over twenty-five years, primarily in the area of peace and justice education and advocacy. She has master’s degrees in Canadian history and theology and has written three books on Canadian Mennonite themes, including *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (CMU Press, 2013).

# The Gerasene demoniac

## Biblical horror story or Jubilee proclamation?

David C. Cramer

I remember learning the story of Jesus's encounter with the demon-possessed man in Luke 8 as a kid and thinking that it's just about the craziest story I've ever heard. For one thing, the old Bibles and Sunday school curriculum called this story the "Gerasene demoniac," which sounds like the name of a horror movie or death metal band. And then



**The old Bibles and Sunday school curriculum called this story the "Gerasene demoniac," which sounds like the name of a horror movie or death metal band.**

this guy is described like the comic book He-man, with his clothes ripped off, roaming around among the tombs, and having to be chained hand and foot to constrain his bulking muscles. This man wasn't just possessed by a demon; he was possessed by so many demons that they called themselves Legion—the perfect name for a horror flick. And to make the story even stranger, Jesus doesn't just cast out the demons and send them on their way; he sends them into a herd of

pigs that immediately become suicidal.

What's going on in this story? And, perhaps more importantly, why was this story taught to impressionable young kids? Didn't our Sunday school teachers worry we would get nightmares? Or was the kind of the point—to instill fear?

Usually this story is taught as an example of Jesus's power. He had just calmed a storm to display his power over nature; now he calms a demoniac to demonstrate his power over super-nature. But while we certainly learn of Jesus's power in this story, that simple lesson doesn't account for all the strange elements of the story. Is it possible that there's more that Luke wants us to take away from this narrative?

In Jesus's inaugural sermon in Luke 4, he read from the scroll of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, particularly Isaiah 61:1–2 (NIV):

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

By proclaiming “the year of the Lord’s favor,” Jesus connects Isaiah’s message to an even older tradition, Leviticus 25, which describes the year of Jubilee. This year of Jubilee, which Yahweh commanded Israel to celebrate every fiftieth year, is a call to the people to reset. It is a year when land is redistributed, debts are remitted, slaves are redeemed, prisoners

are released; a year when all things are reset, restored, renewed, recovered, reestablished, reconciled; a year of remembrance, rest, restitution, repentance, and rejoicing. According to Jesus’s sermon in Luke 4, delivered in the synagogue of his hometown in Nazareth, this declaration of Jubilee was “good news”—literally, “gospel”—to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed.

But we learn almost immediately that this gospel, this declaration of Jubilee, was not viewed as good news by everyone. Right in the middle of Jesus’s sermon, the congregation gets up, forms an angry mob, drives Jesus out of town, and tries to throw him off a cliff.

Four chapters later, we find that Jesus is undeterred. “Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God” (8:1). During these travels, Jesus and his disciples sail “to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee” (v. 26). There Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man from the town. Aware that the man is demon-possessed, Jesus commands the evil spirit to come out of the man. But the man is described as in utter agony and despair. Luke’s description is startling: The man “cries out and falls at Jesus’s feet, screaming at the top of his lungs, ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!’” (v. 28).

**The year of Jubilee is a year when land is redistributed, debts are remitted, slaves are redeemed, prisoners are released; a year when all things are reset, restored, renewed, recovered, reestablished, reconciled; a year of remembrance, rest, restitution, repentance, and rejoicing.**

When I learned this story as a kid, I assumed that this was the demon—or perhaps the spokesperson for the demons—crying out to Jesus for him not to torture them. But that isn't what the text says. It says that *the man* begs Jesus not to torture him. Later, in verse 31, we read that the demons beg Jesus repeatedly not to send them into the Abyss. But here it is the man begging not to be tortured. We might surmise that this man has some idea what it is like to be tortured by well-meaning religious folk. It was probably “for the man’s own good” that they chained him down by his hands and feet and kept him under guard. They may have discussed how he wouldn’t be able to do further harm to “himself and others” if

**For the sake of “law and order” in their town, they were willing to send this man away to his death. By contrast, Jesus sees this man not as a terror to society, a “felon,” or a “super-predator.” He steps into the man’s world and addresses him as a fellow human being.**

he were isolated in a safe place outside of town.

But his home among the tombs belies their high ideals. They locked him up in solitary confinement with a double-life sentence. For the sake of “law and order” in their town, they were willing to send this man away to his death. By contrast, Jesus sees this man not as a terror to society, a “felon,” or a “super-predator.” He steps into the man’s world and addresses him as a fellow human being: “What is your name?” (v. 30). To Jesus, this naked, shackled demoniac is a person with a name.

The man has taken the town’s perception of him and has claimed it as his own. In order to claim some amount of agency, autonomy, and identity as his own, he’s taken his situation and made it his name: Legion. But Jesus—in an enactment of his Jubilee proclamation—gives freedom to this prisoner and releases this man from his oppression. This is good news for the man! He quickly gets dressed and cleaned up and returns to sit at Jesus’s feet—immediately taking the posture of a disciple. He’s so committed to Jesus and his good news that he “begged to go with Jesus” (v. 38)—just as earlier he had “begged” Jesus not to torture him, and his demons had “begged” Jesus to let them go into the herd of pigs.

Instead of making this man an apostle, Jesus makes him an evangelist: “Return home and tell how much God has done for you” (v. 39). So the man goes back to his hometown filled not with demons but with the spirit

of Jubilee. He proclaims high and low how he has been set free—how he has been released from his bondage. Jesus told the man, “tell how much God has done for you,” but Luke tells us that he went all over town telling “how much Jesus had done for him” (v. 39). Jesus is not only proclaiming but also fulfilling Yahweh’s Jubilee. How can that be anything but good news?

Here’s one way: if it disrupts the local economy. There’s no evidence that Israel ever actually celebrated Jubilee as prescribed in Leviticus 25. After all, who would ever voluntarily let their rightfully earned property be returned to its previous owner? Who would ever voluntarily let debts rightfully owed to them be remitted? Who would ever voluntarily let their slaves—their rightfully owned cheap and reliable workforce—be redeemed? Who would ever voluntarily let dangerous criminals—rightfully locked away for their crimes—be released back into society?

Jesus’s good news to the poor, brokenhearted, captive, and imprisoned is perceived as a threat to the rich, well-fed, safe, and secure. Unlike



**Jesus’s good news to the poor, brokenhearted, captive, and imprisoned is perceived as a threat to the rich, well-fed, safe, and secure.**

the man formerly known as Legion who proclaims all over town what Jesus has done for him, those tending to the recently suicidal herd of pigs “run off and report in the town and countryside” what has happened (v. 34). They are not testifying to the good news of Jesus’s Jubilee proclamation; they are reporting suspicious activity—alerting the towns-

people to a new threat to their way of life. They are willing to sacrifice one man for the good of the town.

Jesus, instead, sacrifices the economy of the town for the sake of this one man. When the townspeople arrive and see the man dressed and in his right mind, they respond not by rejoicing that their fellow townsman has been cured but by asking Jesus to leave them “*because they were overcome with fear*” (v. 37). They fear that Legion might be faking it—just pretending to be reformed so that he can be free to wreak havoc on the town once more. They fear that Jesus might somehow further disrupt their local economy. They fear that all this Jubilee stuff might be bad for business.

Instead of viewing the Gerasene demoniac as an object of horror as the townspeople do, Jesus enters into his situation and proclaims the

good news of Jubilee: *You're free!* And then, when the townspeople ask him to leave, he obliges, perhaps shaking the dust off his feet as he goes.



**Instead of viewing the Gerasene demoniac as an object of horror as the townspeople do, Jesus enters into his situation and proclaims the good news of Jubilee: *You're free!***

I suspect that most of us do not regularly encounter people possessed by a legion of demons, and we probably wouldn't know what to do if we did. Yet, are there not people in our community who are in just as much bondage and agony, if not more, than this man named Legion? Instead of responding in fear as the townspeople do, let's respond like Jesus by seeking out those who are feared by society, learning their names, and proclaiming to them the good news of

Jubilee: release from their bondage and freedom from their oppression. And as we go about proclaiming the good news of Jubilee, we may also need to shake the dust off our feet when others respond not out of joy for the release of their fellow human but out of fear of the disruption to their own way of life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from "Release: A Jubilee Sermon (Luke 8:26-39)," *Anabaptist Revisions*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anabaptistrevisions/2019/01/release-a-jubilee-sermon-luke-826-39/>.

# Fear Not

John P. Braun

## Our culture of fear

We live in a culture of fear. It is being fostered by political leaders and accepted by society. It is used to motivate people to get on the bandwagon of particular political causes. Even this fear itself is seen as a fearful thing. We just can't seem to get away from fear.

We experience life in our own cultures and countries, but in many ways we get our cues from powerful empires, and their concerns spill over into smaller and more insignificant countries. The desire to build a border wall between the United States and Mexico, for example, is emblematic of the fear that exists in society. We are told that there are certain people



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of whom we should be afraid. They are poised to take away our jobs and to do us harm, it is said. In order to get the point across and to make sure that the fear takes hold in us, perceived threats are made to sound ever more grave and severe. What if people come and do murderous things among us? What if mobs come to live in our communities and threaten our values and our culture? What if strange people come to take away our jobs? And so on.

Fear infects us now in so many ways. The world seems like a dangerous place. People who are different from us, people who have a different skin colour, people who have a different economic status, or people of a different religion or culture have become so threatening in our minds that we are overcome with fright. This kind of fear affects us not only on a personal or community level but also on the level of national and international politics. There is a culture growing all over the Western world that fosters fear of the other. Our empathy for other peoples is shrinking as is our capacity to welcome the stranger.

Political fears on a national scale also infect us as individuals. We live in a time when many people are afraid and anxious for themselves. We are fearful about jobs, about relationships, about the future of a limited circle of loved ones around us. We are under siege by fear.

### Scripture confronts our fears

It is in the context of our present fear that the words of Scripture come to us in our generation: *Do not be afraid*. These words appear hundreds of times throughout Scripture: *Do not fear. Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all people*.

These words came long ago to Abram and Sarai when they were in uncertain circumstances and their future was unclear. They had come through the time of a family quarrel with their nephew Lot and also conflict with local kings. The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1).

This is not to say that Abram was unafraid but rather that his fear is precisely why these words of assurance were needed. It is also not to say that Abram himself was perfect. He experienced conflict in his own family



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and in his own relationships when Sarai and her slave Hagar were both his spousal partners, as was the custom for some ancient people. Conflict arose among these three, and the result was that Hagar and her little son Ishmael were sent away into the wilderness, which spelled sure death for Hagar and her son. Hagar was Egyptian, not Aramean like Abram and Sarai. She also was a slave and not a free woman. She was that other person, the person to be hated and feared, and yet she was the vulnerable one. And so she was rightfully very fearful. Even now we forget her story because we think mostly of Abram and Sarai, but Hagar’s story

reflects God’s concern for the other. The voice of God’s messenger angel says to Hagar, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God hears the voice of the boy where he is” (Gen. 21:17).

One cannot help but think of the refugee children fleeing countries where their lives are threatened—only to be taken from their parents at the US-Mexico border. There are many children like Ishmael and many parents like Hagar who are afraid today. And yet powerful leaders in the US administration are fostering fear among privileged American citizens about the threat of asylum seekers crossing their border. We should follow the cue from the angel who goes to the refugee and conveys a message that assuages their fear, but instead we are often afraid ourselves of losing our positions of privilege.

### **Justifiable and unjustifiable fears**

I suppose we can't help having fear at times in our lives. I remember when my spouse and I were travelling from the old city of Jerusalem to Bethlehem on my last study leave. We were in our first days in that region and were still uneasy. Before we left Canada, many people would ask us whether we felt safe going to a place of conflict. And when hearing those

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concerns over and over again, it's natural to develop fears. On one of our first bus rides from Jerusalem toward Bethlehem, the bus was stopped and soldiers boarded the bus, but before they boarded they asked everyone standing in the aisle to get off the bus. My spouse and I were separated because she was sitting in a seat. Almost immediately I felt fear. And then young soldiers boarded the bus. They looked uncomfortable and

frightened themselves. And then the young Palestinian who was taken off the bus looked despondent and hopeless and fearful. Everyone was fearful of the other. There are many powerless people in the world who have a right to be afraid. And here I was, a rich Canadian, fearful too but with much less justification. Could the words of Scripture be for me as well? *Do not be afraid.*

Those of us who have had a lot of control in our lives, a lot of power, fear the loss of it. How much more must the poor and the powerless be shaken to the core by their fears of how they will be treated by those in charge?

We live in this privileged, rich country, and yet we still have many fears. We have fears about the education and opportunity on behalf of

our children. Will they make it in this world with the privilege we desire for them? Such fears in turn cause fears among those in the world who are much more justified in their fears. We fear those who want what we have. We believe the false prophets who encourage us to be fearful. We are afraid of those who are in a much weaker position than we are. We too must listen to the voice of Scripture that says, *Do not be afraid.*

### **Overcoming fear through trust in God**

In the season of Advent and Christmas we remember the story of Joseph discovering that Mary was pregnant before the two of them were married. He wants to quietly break the engagement to avoid humiliation for both of them. But then an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20–21). The assuaging of Joseph’s fears makes him a husband to Mary and a father to Jesus.

As Jesus grew and became a man, he taught about anxiety and fear:

*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today. (Matt. 6:25–34)*

And yet Jesus himself knew about fear and shared in human fears in instructive ways. Just before his arrest and trial and execution, he says to his disciples, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake” (Mark 14:34). And then he goes and throws himself on the ground and prays fervently that this tragic hour might pass from him. As the book of Hebrew tells us, in Jesus “we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Jesus knew fear. And yet he is the one who speaks to us, *Do not be afraid*. Despite our relative wealth and privilege, we are in the same boat as the disciples. When the disciples are on the storm-tossed sea, they are afraid for their lives as Jesus sleeps. They awaken him in the stern

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of the boat and ask him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus stills the storm by saying, “Peace! Be still!” Then he asks the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:38–40).

Trusting Jesus is the antidote to our deepest fears. In the final words of the short ending of the Gospel of Mark, the women who find the empty tomb of Jesus see a young man sitting inside the tomb. He tells them to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus is risen. And

yet the final words tell us of their struggle with their fears: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

If this fear had been the final word, we would never have heard the strong and hopeful news of the resurrection. The women must have overcome their fear, because we know the story now, and their initial witness is part of the gospel.

Like these women, so too our fears sometimes paralyze us. Sometimes it is only at the last minute that our fears are dispelled. The good news of the gospel is that trusting God, trusting Jesus, helps us to overcome our fears. We trust Jesus because in him the very worst that could happen (crucifixion) was overcome by the best thing that could happen (resurrection). Jesus is in the boat with us when the storms are at their worst—even when we think that God does not care. We do not have all the answers, but

what we need most is trust to overcome our fears: trust that God has the future in hand and hope that the future is one of resurrection.

### **Witnessing to peace in the midst of fear**

Once our fears are calmed, we can be a witness to a peace that can help calm the fears of others too—some of whom may be in more precarious positions than we are. Out of our trust in God comes love for God and others. As the letter of 1 John testifies, “God is love . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:8, 18). Part of trusting Jesus is to receive and share his love.

As I write this, I am thinking of the parents and children who have been separated from each other this past year because of the fears of rich Americans. If we could be more trustful and more loving by drawing near to God, perhaps we could use that capacity to minimize our own fears. Then our fears would no longer need to victimize others, who only want a chance to be free of fear as well.

We live in a culture of fear, and we need salvation from it. So hear the voice of Jesus say, *Do not be afraid*. Trust the love of Jesus to cast out your fears. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even our fears. Now go out, practice trust in God and the love of Christ to conquer your fears, and follow Jesus into a hopeful future. *Do not be afraid!*

### **About the author**

John P. Braun is pastor of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he has served since 1994 and is retiring in the fall of 2019. John holds a BA (1977) from University of Waterloo, Ontario, and an MDiv (1982) from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He has also studied at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon and has spent sabbatical/study leaves at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem/Bethlehem. He has served recently on the ministerial leadership committee of Mennonite Church Manitoba and earlier on the Manitoba Conference executive committee. He enjoys woodcarving, gardening, and reciting Scripture as a way of practising the oral tradition of the Gospels.

# To be seen within the counselling relationship

Jess Erb

## The fear of being seen and known

The words *Do not fear* have never been a phrase I've uttered within the work I do as a psychotherapist. My work is not to make clients *not* fear but rather for us, together in relationship, to dive into the fearful depths, not shying away from the darkness but dwelling within it together. Nearing the end of a session, my job is also to bring the client up to "shallow" enough waters that they may face another week. Rather than *Do not fear*, perhaps my philosophy would be *Let us embark on a fearful journey together*.

Yet this *togetherness*, I believe, is at the heart of many client's fears—the fear of being truly seen by another. While clients deeply desire to work through their darkest fearful depths, within this another fear lurks: that I will *see* them for who they are. To dive into fear's depths means to take off the carefully laid masks, defences, and layers of protection that we have learned to adorn through the years. While facing one's fears is difficult, it is this latter fear that is even scarier. And it is one that is most difficult to work with in the here-and-now of the counselling relationship.

If being fully *known* by another is one of our deepest human needs, it is also one of the most fearful endeavours we can undertake. In this piece, I address this fear through the Christian liturgical practice of confession and posit how the counselling relationship may be one of the first places in which confession can become communal outside of the church, as counsellor and client work to embark into these dark spaces. Following this, I explore whether the act of counselling may help clients reach a better place to accept absolution, which can only ever come from Christ.

## The liturgy of confession

During our weekly confessional time, heads bow silently as we think of deeds best left unspoken, opening ourselves to admittance into what we have done and left undone. I find this time powerful and enlivening but often far too short; I am usually just getting into the thick of my sins when the absolution comes.

I've complained before, stating that I have way too many sins for just a short pause for silent confession. It's yet to be resolved, either in providing a longer space for confession or in me tightening the reigns on my sinning.

Anecdotal frustrations aside, I have often wondered whether there might be a discomfort in the silence of confession—in paying attention to



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one's darker deeds—perhaps akin to the discomfort of the painful Good Friday often resulting in the rush to speak of the glory of Easter Sunday. Yet the time of confession is one of the most poignant moments in the service: a communion of sinners showing themselves to God and allowing that space to be used for honesty, reflection, and shining light on that which is darkest in our lives. Furthermore, while many faithful Christians hold the belief that the confession time is not revelatory to God—God *already* knows our hearts and minds—what is important is perhaps not that we are telling something *new* to God but rather

that we are opening ourselves up to the creator in such a profound way as to recognise our place *in relation* to God.

The confessional time provides a place in which we can make full recognition of our lack of deservedness next to the creator, who then forgives our sins. Often this confessional time is just before we commune together—thus not only joining the community as a body of broken sinners but also providing a way of partaking within the broken body of Christ.

Nevertheless, confession is temporally, spatially, and situationally limited. While there is vulnerability in confessing sins to God, the wider body rarely, if ever, will hear these sins; thus the darkness disclosed in silence remains there—hidden from the purview of others. And there is good reason for this: it is one thing to silently confess our sins with heads bowed at church and quite another to speak these sins in the open—to meet the gaze of another as we share our darker material. I have felt this most poignantly within my work as a psychotherapist, and I have dubbed it *the fear of encounter*.

## Fear of encounter: The story of Mr. C

He sits with hands neatly folded, as usual, only unlike most sessions he isn't meeting my gaze.

"Mr. C, you seem quiet today. Perhaps a bit apprehensive?"

I have learned to ask these questions more sensitively with Mr. C. He looks up at me, and his eyes are brimming with tears. "I have never told you this before. And I don't think I want to now—to have you look at me after I say this."

His voice trails off only to come back with a resounding loudness that shocks both me and him. "*But I need to,*" he regains himself, "I need you to know this . . . thing . . . because otherwise I will just stay in the dark forever."

Mr. C is by no means the first to wait several months into a session before sharing something powerful; I have learned that often what may bring someone into counselling is not necessarily going to be the main piece of therapeutic work.<sup>1</sup> But I was shocked by Mr. C's resolute need to share his darker story with me.

A timid man, Mr. C usually talked at length about a past that he wished he could have lived—hours poring over how he did not take enough chances and had "wasted" his life. Yet in this counselling hour he shared more. This day, it was not the confession of deeds left undone he shared but rather what he *had* done that had made him feel ashamed. Almost a year of working together, finally I was witness to a narrative—if reluctantly relayed—that had long been locked inside Mr. C and had impaired his every decision since. It was in this moment that I realised it was not Mr. C's timidity that hindered him from living a life he wanted but a deed he felt so dark that the rest of his life was left frozen.

I was honoured and overwhelmed with feeling for what *loss* Mr. C had to endure for almost thirty years. My eyes welled, not with my own feelings but for what I realised Mr. C had gone through. When he saw my tears, his own flowed, and much of the session was spent in silent weeping. He grabbed a tissue and handed me one, and in that exchange our whole counselling relationship changed. This was a pivotal moment for him, for instead of responding in disgust and anger, I was instead pained by his lingering pain. He could see that clearly displayed on my face, in my tears, and in the silence that connected the space between us. In sharing for the first time, Mr. C was met not with another person making him

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1 Michael Jacobs, *Psychodynamic Counselling in Action*, 5th ed. (London: Sage, 2017).

feel shame—which he later revealed is what he feared most from me—but rather with a mutual sharing of his darkness.

### Facing the forgiver

This process of meeting, of being seen, of sharing one’s darker moments often serves as the first instance of real healing for clients.<sup>2</sup> This is because counsellors have a special opportunity to provide a faithful witness to cli-



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ents’ stories, and in this meeting of two people—in sharing aloud the story—a client can feel some of the weight of the silent burden lifted. Thomas Cottle argues that the practice of having someone listen to one’s story might be the “quintessential act of counseling and teaching.”<sup>3</sup> And it is in this way that we can come to be fully human as we share ourselves with another—or, as Heidegger

powerfully describes, rather than believing we *have* relationships, perhaps it is better to think that we *are* our relationships.<sup>4</sup>

There is great power in opening ourselves up to another, and I have been honoured to be a witness to this time and again with clients—illustrated through the vignette of Mr. C. This means that a bigger part of my job is enabling both the fear and desire to be seen to entangle and work together, for us to dive into these fears through *relationship*. In the counselling space, a client can look me in the eyes and open up about deeds that have long been left in darkness, shining light and mercy into these dark areas. Hearing the story and feeling the weight of it allow for these pieces of self to be carried by another—another who is also flawed.<sup>5</sup> Getting to this space of being *able* to share, of fighting past the fear of encounter, is of

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2 Thomas J. Cottle, “Witness to the Story,” *Schools: Studies in Education* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 143–70; Rosemary Rizq and Mary Target, “‘The power of being seen’: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of how experienced counselling psychologists describe the meaning and significance of personal therapy in clinical practice,” *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 36, no 2 (May 2008): 131–53.

3 Cottle, “Witness to the Story,” 144.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 2008 [1962]).

5 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994).

the utmost importance for this encounter to happen. And when it does, it can provide the path to healing.

### Pathways from confession to absolution

Nearing the end of our session, tears dried and shaky voices more stable, Mr. C looked at me and asked, “Am I OK? Will it be OK?”

In that moment, I realised that he was asking if I was OK with him, with what he shared. Was I? Leaning toward him, I said the only thing I could think of: “I don’t know why I am saying it like this, but Mr. C, I forgive you. I see how much hurt you’ve been through. Though I was not at all involved, I feel involved—enough to say that there is forgiveness here.”

While I have had many experiences of being a witness to clients’ pain, this was the first time I had ever felt the need to “forgive” them for what

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had happened. But in this moment, that weird phrase seemed like exactly what was needed. And it made me realise that if I, as counsellor, act as a witness for another’s story, perhaps I can also enable the client an opening to feel some of the forgiveness that they have yet to let themselves feel. As Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne posit, the unconditional positive regard of clients can allow them to start to care for and appreciate themselves.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps sharing our darker deeds

enables a way of asking for forgiveness or acceptance into these hidden areas of our lives.

Yet asking for forgiveness and feeling forgiven are two different things. For Mr. C, what led to the breakthrough was not that he asked for my forgiveness but that he received my care by both seeing me feel his pain and hearing me speak words of forgiveness. Both of these acts meant that in subsequent sessions he could work with this material within the shame that darkness and fear had held him trapped. I will never be able to offer even a fraction of the absolution that Christ does. But by welcoming one’s darker story with mercy, care, and unconditional positive regard,<sup>7</sup>

6 Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne, *Person-Centred Counselling in Action*, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2013).

7 C. R. Rogers, “The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 44, no. 3 (2007): 240–48.

I see how my witness and care can offer new avenues to both accepting brokenness and seeing new paths to redemption. As with the confessional liturgical time, it can be just as hard to realise that we are redeemed as sinners—to recognise that our place in relation to God has been overtaken by the powerful act of the cross. By offering myself as both counsellor and witness—seeing into these darker deeds and providing a space for relationship—I see how this act enables that moment between confession and absolution. Modelling this process, creating a semblance of what *could be* in the counselling room, allows the practice of being seen, and still cared for, to hold sway.

### **About the author**

Jess Erb is a qualified psychotherapist, having completed her doctorate of Psychotherapy and Counselling from the University of Edinburgh. She currently practices using a dialogue between the psychodynamic and person-centred perspectives and has counseled both youth and adults in Winnipeg, Canada, and Edinburgh, United Kingdom. She has presented at conferences in Europe and North America on the counselling relationship and the counsellor's presence. Jess grew up in Squamish, British Columbia, and currently lives with her husband, Landon, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where they attend St. Margaret's Church.

# Facing my fears

## Finding a spouse through online dating

Margaret De Jong

### **An unexpected awakening**

About eight years ago, I was on a week-long personal retreat of prayer and solitude. As an introvert, I considered this delectable spiritual food. After several days of Scripture reading, praying, journaling, and walking in God's beautiful creation, I had an unusual early morning awakening. It was before dawn, and I found myself in tears with a heavy heart. That was so out of character for me. I am typically a genuinely joy-filled person, although sad situations can certainly lead me to cry. But to wake up in tears? Where was that coming from?

As I journaled about my unexpected sadness, several issues surfaced, particularly related to my ministry setting in Senegal. I had been there close to six years, and this retreat time was showing me I had some deep wounds to address before returning to Senegal for another season of work. But what surprised me even more, as an independent single person, was the realization that I was sad to not have a spouse with me on my life's journey.

Thankfully, I still had a couple days left of the retreat to process my feelings related to my singleness. I don't want to say I was afraid to be single because I wasn't; I had clearly proven myself capable of life as a single. Nor was I looking for someone to complete me, even though popular culture here in North America, as well as in other places I have lived, gives the message that you need to be paired up with someone to be normal and happy. I knew my wholeness comes through my relationship with my Creator and no one else. Sadly, many singles do not understand that only God can meet all their needs. Although worship and Scripture point to contentment in God, the message of many church-goers is that you need to find a mate to be happy, and you are abnormal if you are single.

Although I was blessed with many wonderful housemates over the years, I was sad to not have a more permanent life companion. I had heard enough from others to know that marriage was much hard work,

but plenty of energy also goes into getting to know a new living mate every year or two. I wanted to be with someone for the long haul, to have years of shared experiences and support through life's ups and downs.

I found myself trying to negotiate with God. I had been serving the Lord overseas for close to two decades. Why hadn't the Lord given me a



**I found myself trying to negotiate with God. I had been serving the Lord overseas for close to two decades. Why hadn't the Lord given me a spouse?**

spouse? I was doing a lot of work for the Lord, so couldn't the Lord do this for me? However, the Spirit nudged me to recognize that I was trying to find favor with God through my works, and I confessed my self-righteousness to the Lord of grace. Then I found myself struggling with other questions: How important is this desire for marriage? What if I meet someone who is not a missionary? Am I willing to leave missions to be in a long-

term relationship? Then the deeper question surfaced: How much of my identity is in my role as a missionary rather than in my relationship as God's beloved child? And that is when I felt fear.

### **Releasing my fears to God's love**

I was afraid to leave missions, because I didn't know anything else. My adult life had been focused overseas. So much of my identity, and the identity of my closest friends, was that of missionary and international worker. I considered myself a hardcore missionary and was concerned that others might think I could no longer hack the challenging lifestyle and work. And I wondered how I would adapt to being immersed in North American culture, which in many ways was now foreign to me. But in the midst of acknowledging those fears, I sensed a flood of God's love upon me, and knew that being God's beloved child was enough.

Single or married? It didn't matter. I was God's beloved child. Missionary or not? It was of no consequence. Being in God's love was all sufficient.

But another fear surfaced: admitting to others that the strong independent woman didn't necessarily want to be so independent anymore, that she was recognizing she desired a life companion. Peeling off the layers of my self-made identity was scary. What would people think of what lay beneath? But during this holy moment I was so enveloped by God's

love that I was able to release my fears. I knew God loved me as I was, and that was all I needed.

This retreat was an epiphany for me that came out of intentional, extended time with the Lord, away from my usual work and routines. In Scripture we repeatedly see the command to not be afraid. Clearly, living in fear is not God’s intent for us. Yet how can we release our fears if we don’t even know they are there? While engaged in many ministry activities, I had been unaware of some of my deepest emotions and fears. As embodied beings, our emotions affect us in some way or another, whether or not we have identified them. In the busyness of our lives, each of us needs to find ways to slow down and pay attention both to God and to our own embodied self so that with God we can process and work through whatever is unconsciously weighing us down.

### **Entering the world of online dating**

Having recognized my sadness of not being married, and willing to face my fears of sharing honestly with others, I then had new concerns related to finding a compatible mate. As my faith and faith values are the most important part of my life, I was unwilling to enter a relationship with someone of a differing belief system. In the region where I lived in Senegal, 99.9 percent of the population didn’t share my faith. And as any single woman missionary will tell you, single guy missionaries are few and far between. My prospects of finding a life mate in Senegal were close to nil.

I’d heard of various online dating sites, yet I was afraid to be seen as one of those desperate people who would do anything to find a spouse. But then I heard of several friends and acquaintances—people who I respected—who found their spouses through online dating, and I finally, timidly decided to try it out. Little did I know that I was ahead of the times. Online dating has since taken off, especially among the young. In the United States in 2018, 30 percent of those ages eighteen to twenty-nine years were using online dating sites or apps.<sup>1</sup>

There are thousands of dating sites and apps out there, and they differ greatly in how they operate and to whom they cater. I was concerned with using a site where persons were looking for relationships that could lead to marriage. In exploring a handful of such sites, I found significant differences in how the sites provided you with matches: from those that

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<sup>1</sup> “Online Dating: Statistics and Facts,” *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/top-ics/2158/online-dating>.

simply provided you with all site users who were in your defined gender, age, and geographical range, to those that used an algorithm that required users to complete a preliminary questionnaire that the site claimed would lead to highly compatible matches. I noticed a significant difference in the quality of people's profiles from site to site: those who were using free sites that required little information from the users typically did not come across as strong candidates for a healthy relationship, whereas those using sites that required a fee and preliminary reflection by the user appeared more likely to take seriously the hard work of relationship building.

Online dating is a huge industry with frequent changes. The site I used no longer boasts the aspects I appreciated most about it: it has significantly reduced the number of questions it uses for its matching algorithm



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and no longer offers many of the steps of guided communication that were one of its key features in the past. I share this to make two points. First, the online dating industry is ultimately more concerned with meeting the demands of today's consumer than with the hard work of relationship building. Second, these sites change rapidly, and we cannot assume that how a site worked yesterday is

how it will work today. Anyone exploring online dating needs to critically evaluate the sites as they currently operate.

One of my fears of using this medium was the potential for scammers. On several occasions, I had persons communicating with me, but I sensed discrepancies in their writing style from one paragraph to the next. So I cut the section of their writing that seemed unusual, pasted it into Google, and found myself on the LinkedIn page of someone of a different name and an irreconcilable photo. I reported these issues to the dating site, and the persons were blocked from further communications on the site. A few times I received messages from matches that their subscription was about to expire, asking whether I could communicate with them via my personal email rather than through the site. The site I was using strongly warned against moving to personal email early in the relationship. I suspected these persons were phishing for personal information, and I did not oblige. I also concluded that if someone was seriously interested in me, they would be willing to pay for another month on the site.

When I was initially on the site, I was checking daily for communication from my matches, as I expected a quick result. After all, the internet has opened the way for instant shopping and instant messaging,

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so shouldn't it also provide an instant relationship? By the grace of God, I soon recognized that daily clicking onto the site was only leading to daily disappointment and discouragement. Thus, I personally chose to not visit the site more than once per week. I began to recognize how the online medium for dating easily malforms us to be impatient, rather than forming us to the Spirit-fruit of patience (Gal. 5:22). In addition, online dating is much like other online shopping: you

can be very picky about what you want, and at any time you may decide your commodity—whether it be a new relationship or your long-term spouse—needs an upgrade to the latest version on the market. To counter this malformation, the church must remain committed to teaching about the covenantal love that God has demonstrated toward us and that we are to demonstrate to the world in our marriage relationships.

### **Finding a spouse—online**

Contrary to a quick result, I was on the site for several years before Jeff, who is now my husband, sent me a smile—and this just months after I had made the difficult decision to transition out of mission work and move back to Canada. As I had done with others who had contacted me, I was quick to ask Jeff to share with me about his faith walk. But unlike other persons who summed up their faith in a sentence or less, Jeff wrote a couple pages to share how surrendering to God has shaped his life. I was convinced that he was serious about his faith and was willing to explore our relationship further. But I still wanted to make sure that Jeff was the real deal. By knowing his first name, his profession, and the rural town where he lived, I was able to perform a Google search that quickly landed me on his professional page. I was happy to find a matching photo as well as other corresponding information.

Jeff and I recognized the limit of a medium that has one matched with someone he or she or their community has never met. We were unwilling to meet in person until we had communicated with each other's

references. Three persons who knew me well communicated with Jeff over email, answering his various questions about my character, and likewise I emailed some of Jeff's friends and family. We also had video chats with two other people.

Even though Jeff's references were all leading me to believe that he was a man of high character, I still wanted to be cautious about how we met in person. I had read of too many incidences where the first face-to-face meeting of an online relationship did not end well. Jeff affirmed my desire to be in a safe place, and on one of my trips back to North America, he met me for a weekend while I was staying with a friend who had already met Jeff via video. This was a perfect opportunity for my friend to get to know Jeff better and to offer her perspective and counsel.

After our initial meeting, Jeff and I continued in our long-distance relationship with occasional opportunities to see each other in person, typically while visiting each other's families and friends. Jeff also visited me in Senegal, staying with some of my colleagues. All these visits gave us opportunity to hear from others regarding our relationship. After more than two decades in community-oriented cultures, I was unaware—until recent conversations—how countercultural Jeff and I were to the privacy of Western individualism in the way we intentionally sought counsel from others.

Jeff and I also felt it was prudent to live in the same geographical location for a season, to see each other in day-to-day life rather than only when one or both of us were on vacation. I moved to Jeff's town for three months, staying with one of his church contacts. And near the end of that time—almost two years to the day after Jeff sent me his first smile—after considerable intentionality in how we went about our relationship, we became engaged. Several months later we covenanted before God and community to love each other until death separates us.

### **What I learned from online dating**

My story demonstrates that online dating can work with appropriate cautions. In addition to safety precautions and concerns of how the digital medium malforms us, most significant is the importance of community input. Algorithms may match people in ways that dating sites consider



**I strongly encourage the church to face fears of singleness and online dating by calling all to live in the wholeness that is ours through God.**

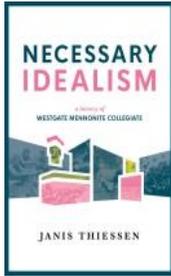
ically while visiting each other's families and friends. Jeff also visited me in Senegal, staying with some of my colleagues. All these visits gave us opportunity to hear from others regarding our relationship. After more than two decades in community-oriented cultures, I was unaware—until recent conversations—how countercultural Jeff and I were to the privacy of Western individualism in the

highly compatible, but we need persons who know us well to speak into significant life decisions. Scripture points to the wisdom of many advisers (Prov. 15:22). I strongly encourage the church to face fears of singleness and online dating by calling all to live in the wholeness that is ours through God, to inform about the cautions of the digital medium, and to seek various ways to mentor and be a voice regarding all relationships—and all the more so for those that begin online.

### **About the author**

Margaret De Jong lives in Fort Kent, Maine, with her beloved husband and precious stepson. They love the beauty and outdoor activities of the Saint John River Valley. Margaret spent twenty-two years in international work with Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mission Network and is currently completing MDiv studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

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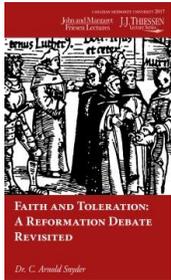


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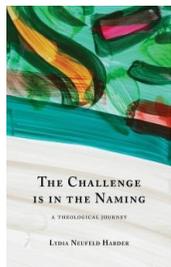


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