

When Chocolate Isn't Enough
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Meditation:

In times of transition and uncertainty, it may seem that fear has the upper hand. We look for the answers, and they are not always obvious. If we can not clear our minds and our hearts to be able to search for answers in the first place, then we are stuck in that place of fear and inaction. Fear is just as deadly as the stony gaze of the Medusa, blocking our path and keeping us on the same hamster wheel.

When I worked in finance, I kept a quote in my cubicle that helped me with the pressure and responsibilities of my job. I have also used this many times since, when I feel my heart weighed down with uncertainty or feel like I can not move forward without confronting what holds me back.

The *Litany Against Fear* is an incantation spoken by characters in Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* and its sequels, in order to focus their minds in times of peril. The litany is as follows:

*I must not fear.
Fear is the mind-killer.
Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.
I will face my fear.
I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.
Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.
Only I will remain.*

Sermon: When Chocolate Isn't Enough...

I've got a message this morning. The message is that chocolate sometimes isn't enough, but sometimes we need a little chocolate. (Pass out basket out chocolate) Enjoy it or pass the basket as you wish.

So have some of you been watching the news? Or have you been wanting to avoid it? How about when the Dow drops 500 points? When the Dow drops 700 points? Is that enough to get you

going? Or should we add in the election season? Maybe a dash of gas shortage or high gas prices will tip it over the top. There is no doubt that we have been living in uncertain and stressful times. Where is the hope amid fear? Where are the solutions when people are hurting and scared...when we are at war...when we are fighting to keep our bills paid...when we are seeking calm amid the chaos?

Before we answer any of these questions, I have to ask:

Are we ready?

Are we awake?

After all, We get up each morning, either grabbing for the alarm clock and squinting to see if we can hit snooze for one more second. Or maybe some of us are lucky enough to wake up without the clamoring alarm of BEEP BEEP. There are so many different ways to wake up. Yet, how often do we really want to be awake? In college, it was the light of the sun peeking in unwelcome after a long night of study – *or* a long night of socializing. My mom used to knock on my door when I was little. Then I'd hear “Julieeeee”, and after a few minutes of my face buried deeper in my pillow, the tone would get more strident. “**Julie, You are going to miss the bus *again*.**” There were many mornings that the early bus was way too early for me.

Now, it seems time has circled around. Only I don't have someone yelling down the hall. It is my own responsibility to set my alarm for early enough to beat the traffic to Emory, and hope that I've put out the right clothes and have packed the right books. Inevitably Ehren wakes up and joins us, so I'll try to tiptoe out before he wakes. This whole dance of awakesness and greeting the academic day challenges me by its pace and demands. Lately, I've been listening to books on tape while I'm driving. I want to think about someone else's life story for a while, and listening to NPR twice a day has been too much to take in the past few weeks. Whether it is the Fall Fund drive or the news I can't tell you.

It is important to know the line in the sand.

Sometimes, we just need to be nice to ourselves. We need some brain candy. There are times when we aren't ready to tackle world-shaking problems. It is all we can do to get out bed and make the bus. I used to laugh when my mom would get a big pile of sappy romances from the library, and think to myself. “How can she read that *garbage*?”

Well, I certainly have more sympathy for that desire now. When life is overwhelming, there is a need for pleasure. There is a need for a space of calm. As I've been studying for some hard mid-terms this week – I can't help but read why Angelina Jolie wants to have more than 6 children. I want to look on Facebook and see who's updated in the past 5 seconds. I look at my email constantly, just in case. Maybe someone has sent an important email for me to read, something entertaining. The pressure only makes my distraction worse. Though I don't get up from the desk. Then I would be *abandoning my responsibility*. Yet, somehow surfing the internet or flipping through the artists on my play list is OKAY. After all, I am sitting at my desk. I am *just* about to get back to work. This mind game is important to my sense of maintaining my work ethic.

I know my first reaction to stress is wanting to buy a hot chocolate or a creamy chai tea from some dimly-lit relaxing coffee spot... or find an uncrowded book store. Then I can thumb through books that I don't have time to read yet, nor the budget to splurge on. There are some hard-wired needs that we have. **We need to feel good.** We need to know that things are going to be okay. In this climate of economic strife, market roller coaster, buyouts, political wrangling, and national administration change – it really feels like the median line of normal is an imaginary line.

It is easy to be drawn to a quick fix – a “pick me up.” Keeping those pick ups healthy, are what is really important. There are movies. Going to Blockbuster and getting a comedy or sitting in a movie theater with some buttery popcorn and a slushy can hit that visceral need for comfort like no other. There are brisk walks, yoga, or just turning off your gadgets and cell phones for some peace and quiet. And of course there is a chocolate stash, you know, for stress emergencies.

According to www.chocolate.org, Chocolate is made from the seeds of the tropical cacao tree

and the Greek term for chocolate, *theobroma*, literally means "food of the gods". Though there are references enough to chocolate being "sinful" and of course we might have run across the "Devil's Food Cake" on the shelves of Kroger.

These Cacao beans were used by the Aztecs to prepare a hot, frothy beverage with stimulant and restorative properties. Chocolate itself was reserved for warriors, nobility and priests. The Aztecs esteemed its reputed ability to confer wisdom and vitality. Taken fermented as a drink, chocolate was also used in religious ceremonies. Emperor Montezuma allegedly drank 50 goblets a day. Aztec taxation was levied in cacao beans. 100 cacao beans could buy a slave. 12 cacao beans bought the services of courtesan.

Pleasure is essential when we are in distress. Before we can move on to deeper questions, we have to be able to function. We have to be able to breathe.

According to a National Health Interview Survey:

- 75% of the general population experiences at least "some stress" every two weeks
- 73 percent of Americans name money as the number one factor that affects their stress level.

According to the American Institute on Stress, Americans spend \$11.3 billion per year to cope with stress. Job stress is estimated to cost U.S. industry \$300 billion annually. Sounds like we need more than a bank bail out. We need a stress bail out.

Elbert Hubbard, a U.S. Representative from Iowa said, "The man who doesn't relax and hoot a few hoots voluntarily, now and then, is in great danger of hooting hoots and standing on his head for the edification of the pathologist and trained nurse, a little later on." "What should we do.? We've all heard the tale of Chicken Little. Yet, when we feel like the skys-a-falling – what *do* we *do*?

How many of us try to find our answers by doing? Working ourselves to the bone can also be a distraction, and we can justify that it is the best way. Falling into the cycle of guilt and over work can be quite easy. We get to the point of exhaustion and then instead of resting we vegetate in front of the

tube or lay comatose because our bodies and minds have had enough. There is a difference between honoring your need to rest, and collapsing from exhaustion. Yet, it is hard to live that “self care” motto. The workplace gives us the message to keep up or fall behind. Parents feel tugged to be the best parents they can be. Are we green enough? Are we ethical enough? Do we eat well? When is the last time you exercised? There are so many “supposed to's” and “shoulds” that our mind can go to. It isn't enough that the messages from the outside give us stress. Our internal dialog and inside critic can also send us into the fear spiral. Where is the choice in all of this?

Carlos Castaneda said, “The trick is in what one emphasizes. We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves happy. The amount of work is the same.”

When our inner critic starts mouthing off - What if if we said the following things – instead of chiding ourselves for our failings...

What I do is enough.

I love myself and I do good work.

I am a good parent.

I am a good friend.

I deserve to rest.

I enjoy reading. I enjoy reading a book to my child, even if it isn't on their homework list.

How much is the reality that we create in ourselves, the reality that we can make manifest? There is much in our lives that we can not dictate. Yet our hearts and minds belong to us. We have power that can be made manifest in our action, our intention, and our life choices.

I asked the question at the beginning –

Are we ready?

Are we awake?

Life is waiting for us, isn't it? Is it a life where we serve the taskmaster of stress, anxiety, and fear? Do we search for surface comforts to solve our fear and stress every time? We might reach to

deeper wells for moving forward. Can we break the patterns that are making our souls tired and our hearts sad?

When we move away from fear, we lose the shackles placed upon upon us. When we disengage from the zero-sum game and approach our obstacles from a place of love and truth, we are set free again. Spiritual activist and author, Marianne Williamson said, “And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” She also stated that, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.” It is frightening to move against the vast inertia of apathy, blasé coffee talk and hopelessness. If we are to shake the halls of government, uphold the rights that many have died and fought to keep, work to create a world that we want to live in, we *must* not let fear dampen our inner light, our inner voice.

In the 1700's John Murray became the first Universalist minister in America, and he refused to be cowed by those who would have him keep silent. He kept preaching in the face of persecution and fear. In the 1800's brave souls risked life and limb on the Under Ground Railroad, moving in the face of fear - believing in the sanctity of persons and the right to freedom. We watched on television as one lone protester stood in front of a tank in Tienanmen Square. What about the students that stand up for GLBT concerns in their high schools? It is the engagement, not how it is done. It is the intention and action that beat inertia. .

Forrest Church, a prominent Unitarian Universalist minister and writer, says that courage is when fear speaks and the heart answers. After absorbing fear's best argument, the heart says no. As Church explains, nothing out of the ordinary is required. Anyone, and at almost any time, can find the courage to answer fear. When I heard Forrest Church lecture at this year's General Assembly, he profoundly said, “When you move away from fear you move towards love.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson said “Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world.”

When fear is overwhelming, use the tools at hand. You may need a little chocolate. You may need a litany against it – *Fear is the mind killer*. When we move through the fear, when we dig deeper and wider for awareness and focused action – that is when answers are found.

Reach out – you are not alone. Reach within – there is strength and inspiration. And never forget that love is stronger than fear. In this kind of love, we can bring our greatest gifts to ourselves and indeed the world that we live in.

Amen.