

“In the Presence of Fear”

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In college, I dated a man named Erik. We were both philosophy majors and, well, he looked the part. His curly, dark hair was always a bit wild, his glasses were large and thick, and his style leaned towards corduroy. And so, when I first brought him home to meet my family one summer, my brothers were not too impressed. Except Erik also had another side as a wilderness adventurer.

During our visit, my younger brother Jon brought us out to a railroad bridge over a river where he and his friends had been jumping off. He wanted to show off a bit to his siblings and to this new guy. While not sky high, it was a good-sized jump down—maybe 30 feet—and most people understandably hesitated or refused to jump. Erik? Well, to my brothers’ astonishment, he simply walked onto the bridge and went over the edge without stopping. Fearless.

Scientists tell us that fear is an ancient emotion—linked to our most primitive brain and our desire to survive. Fear is part of what helps to keep us alive as a species—helping us to be watchful of threats as well as telling us when to flee, to fight, or to freeze.

However, as “Hidden Brain” podcast host Shankar Vedantam cautions in a January 5th episode entitled [“Cultivating Courage”](#): *“fear can keep us from living our best lives, reaching for our dreams and upholding our values.”* Sometimes instead of helping us, fear can be a hindrance to living more fully, more authentically.

There *is* plenty to be afraid of. There are mopeds screeching along city streets ignoring street signals. There are the shadows of possible illness and any number of medical events. And there is a federal government whose immigration enforcement turned deadly this week. By living in a complex, uncertain world, these and many other threats mean dwelling in the presence of fear.

So, can we do anything about our fears? Are we just born relatively courageous or cowardly people? Or can we learn how to better relate to the presence of fear?

The “Cultivating Courage” podcast features Ranjay Gulati, a behavioral scientist at Harvard Business School, as the special guest. Gulati argues that courage is something we *can* cultivate by pointing to the story of Ghandi. Did you know that as a younger man, Ghandi was a London barrister terrified of public speaking? And yet, convicted of the injustice of British imperialism, Ghandi chose a path that led to speaking to millions. Courage, says Gulati, is *“a choice you make*

in the face of fear. It forces you to become acquainted with the discomfort we feel when we are scared.” Acting courageously is not erasing fear, but changing our relationship to fear.

To further explain acting courageously, Gulati introduces the idea of a “moral quest.” A “moral quest” is a narrative we tell about ourselves and our situation that influences what we are willing to risk. The narrative puts our fear into a larger context of “sacred values” for which we are willing to take risks, face danger, and fight to preserve. Fueled by a “moral quest” to pursue or protect our “sacred values,” we may act more bravely.

As an example of a moral quest, Gulati tells the story of former Facebook employee Frances Haugen. After witnessing the radicalization of a friend through social media, Haugen spoke out publicly, denouncing the algorithmic *choices* Facebook makes that endanger children and stoke divisiveness—placing profits over the impact on people and our democracy. While Haugen bravely spoke out against a powerful corporate behemoth, the podcast notes that Haugen and others on moral quests do not go it alone or necessarily move impulsively. Rather, their courageous acts emerge from a web of supportive relationships and strategic thinking. Before going public, Haugen spoke to friends, a whistleblower attorney, and developed a press plan. Gaining *information* and cultivating *supports* can help us to act bravely.

But sometimes waiting to have *all* the answers before we act can be too late. Gulati uses the example of firefighters. After arriving on the scene of a fire with some basic knowledge, they can’t just sit back gathering data as the building burns! Instead, they enter a structure while continue to assess the situation as they decide their next step. “*Rather than knowing before acting,*” Gulati explains, “*sometimes you have to act your way into knowing.*”

Sometimes I wish it were different than this. I wish we didn’t have to face the fear of unknown outcomes. I wish we didn’t have to be afraid for our own health and well-being, for the safety and happiness of loved ones, for the dignity and freedom of residents of this nation. And yet, fear *is* part of our lives.

For nearly a year now, we have lived in a nation governed by an administration whose choices counter many of the “sacred values” we hold as Unitarian Universalists—including justice, equity, and pluralism. Not to mention centering LOVE in our actions. Over the past twelve months, we have witnessed relentless attacks on scientific funding; programs to support diversity, equity, and inclusion; transgender lives; access to affordable healthcare; and, of course, immigrants.

And, over the last nine days, a new level of fear has erupted following the federal government’s incursion into Venezuela and then the shooting death of Heather Good by an ICE agent in

Minneapolis. Like many of you, I try to be aware of the news without having fear overcome my hope or harden my heart in despair.

And here is where I think Thich Nhat Hanh on fear is helpful. Fear *is* real, Han agrees. Fear and threats to our survival or to values and people we cherish are not illusions. Indeed, he counsels:

“The only way to ease our fear and be truly happy is to acknowledge our fear and look deeply at its source. Instead of trying to escape from our fear, we can invite it up to our awareness and look at it clearly and deeply.” (Fear, 1)

This is not easy. I struggle too. It can be easier to say, “Oh, no, I don’t want to think about that.” But when we repeatedly push our fears away rather than look at them, we do not learn how to live *with* our fears.

In other words, being “fearless”—having *no* fear—is not the goal. Research psychologist Arash Javanbakht describes how injury to the parts of the brain that assess fear puts people at great danger—for example they show only curiosity towards picking up and handling snakes without consideration of any potential risk. (*Afraid*, 56) Having *no* fear robs us of our evolutionary advantages that increase our survival from all manner of time-tested dangers.

Instead of eradicating all fear, Javanbakht, Julati, *and* Thich Nhat Hanh counsel us to learn how to live *with* our fears. How might we learn to be more comfortable in the presence of our fear? How might we still act . . . still enter the proverbial burning building?

For Thich Nhat Hanh, *practicing* mindfulness cultivates our capacity to live with fear. If you’re less familiar with mindfulness, it is an intentional practice of noticing our experience. As Buddhist teacher [Sharon Salzberg explains, mindfulness](#) is “*the practice of paying attention in a way that creates space for insight.*” As we pay attention to our experience of being afraid, we might notice our muscles are tense, our heart racing, our mind hyper-focused on the threat. By becoming aware of our fear, we create that bit of distance from it. “Oh, I notice I’m feeling afraid right now.” This awareness then generates the capacity to observe our fear with curiosity—why am I feeling afraid? Are there actions I can take to lower the fear? To calm myself? Am I in danger *in this moment* or is my fear rooted in the past or in a possible future?

Mindfulness counsels us to be present *here and now*. In observing our fears, we can practice learning to live *with* them. Because fear is not going away. Fear is part of our living, just as happiness, sorrow, joy, pain and so many other emotions are part of life. It’s not abnormal to be afraid or to feel anxious when confronted with a threat. Although, it is important to say that sometimes people do struggle with phobias, anxiety disorders, PTSD, and other fear-related

psychological dynamics that absolutely benefit from professional support, even medications. And there is also the everyday fear we all feel just trying to stay alive and connected to others.

Yesterday I joined with hundreds of others downtown for a [rally sponsored by LUCE](#), the Immigrant Justice Network of Massachusetts, to protest the violent actions of ICE and the killing of Renee Good. Again and again the speakers named the presence of fear *and* called for action in the face of fear. ‘We fight fear by organizing, by coming together,’ one speaker said. ‘Love drives out fear,’ said another.

Walking from the church to City Hall Plaza to join the protest, I passed by the monument to the brave soldiers of the [Massachusetts 54th](#). Someone had placed a handwritten sign before it that read: “**Humanity Over Fear.**” This juxtaposition of that sign on that memorial reminded me of how much risk some take on behalf of others. Sometimes our “sacred values” call us to action even when we are afraid. Sometimes, we learn to live with the fear, because we put it into a larger context of our deeper commitments, our “moral quest.” And sometimes, we move forward past our fear because we realize we are not alone, that we have a network of supportive relationships and information, skills and capacities to help us on the way.

When Erik stepped onto that railroad bridge and jumped, he knew my brother and his friends had safely jumped before. He also knew that he was a strong swimmer and, from years of rock climbing, was accustomed to heights. Perhaps rather than saying he was *fearless*, you might say that any fear he had was held within a larger context of information and a cultivated tolerance of risk.

While you may not be jumping off any literal bridges in the near future, you are likely facing your own risks, dangers, anxieties, and fears. As you observe your own fears, my hope for all of us is that we learn to live mindfully in the presence of fear. May we hold on to our sacred values, our supportive relationships, and a sense of the capacities and skills we bring to our survival each day. We may not ever be fearless, but we can cultivate our courage to still act, even in the presence of fear.

Amen. Ashe. May it be so.

Resources

“Cultivating Courage,” Hidden Brain Podcast, January 5, 2026, access at: <https://www.hiddenbrain.org/podcast/you-2-0-cultivating-courage/>

“What Does Mindfulness Really Mean Anyway,” The On Being Project, April 5, 2015, access at: <https://onbeing.org/blog/what-does-mindfulness-really-mean-anyway/#:~:text=Sharon%20Salzberg%20and%20Joseph%20Goldstein,focus%2C%20and%20greater%20emotional%20clarity>.

Afraid: Understanding the Purpose of Fear and Harnessing the Power of Anxiety, Arash Javanbakht, MD, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025)

Fear: Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm, Thich Nhat Hanh, (London, Rider, 2012)