

ANTIDOTES FOR FEAR

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“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.” I John 4:18.

“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” II Timothy 1:7.

Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an “age of fear.” In these days of terrifying change, bitter international tension and chaotic social disruption, who has not experienced the paralysis of crippling fear? Everywhere there are people depressed and bewildered, irritable and nervous all because of the monster of fear. Like a nagging hound of hell, fear follows our every footstep, leaving us tormented by day and tortured by night.

Our fears assume many different disguises and dress themselves in strangely different robes. There are those superstitious fears that range from the fear of walking under a ladder to a fear of Friday the thirteenth. There are those fears that fall under the category of “personal anxiety.” Everywhere we find men and women facing these fears. They fear bad health; so they begin to find evidence of disease in every meaningless symptom. They fear growing old; so they dose themselves with a succession of drugs advertised to keep them young. When they are not worried about their physical health, they are worried about their personalities. They fear others and they fear themselves; so they are driven through life with a sense of insecurity, a lack of self-confidence, and a nagging feeling of failure. They end up with what the psychologists call an inferiority complex. Strangely enough there are those who fear success; so they wander aimlessly down the frittering road of excessive drink and sexual promiscuity. How many people have allowed endless fears to transform the sunrise of love and peace into a sunset of inner depression!

Sometimes our fears are dressed in the garments of mental phobias. These nagging phobias take many forms—fear of water, fear of high places, fear of closed rooms, fear of darkness and fear of being alone. These phobias continue to accumulate until at last many face what the psychiatrists call phobiaphobia—the fear of fear, being afraid of being afraid.

Then there are those economic fears which are especially real in this

highly competitive society. Karen Horney has set forth the thesis that most of the psychological problems of our age grow out of this gnawing economic fear.³ Many men are tormented by the possible or actual failure of their businesses. Others are tortured by the uncertainty of the stock market. Numerous people are plagued with the fear of unemployment and the collapse of their careers because of a force called automation. **One of the tragic things about unemployment is that it crushes a man's sense of pride, drowns his spirit, and leaves him standing before his wife and children as a disastrous failure. How real and frustrating are our economic fears!**

There are, above all, the religious and ontological fears. They are at [~~strikeout illegible~~] bottom the fear of death and nonbeing.⁴ The atomic bomb and nuclear weapons have lifted the fear of death to morbid proportions. More than anything else, the haunting spectacle of possible nuclear annihilation has saturated our day with "the spirit of fear." Hamlet's soliloquy, "to be or not to be," is the desperate question falling from many trembling lips.⁵ Indicative of the intensity of this contemporary fear of death is the mad quest to build fallout shelters; but the fear increases even more when sober assessment reminds us that a shelter would be of little use against a sizeable H-bomb. In agonizing desperation we petition our governments to increase the nuclear stockpile; but we soon discover that this fanatical quest to maintain "a balance of terror" increases rather than diminishes fear, for it leaves all nations frightfully at tip-toe stance not quite knowing which diplomatic faux pas will result in the pushing of the fatal bottom. **The fear of death leaves so many people wandering through a bleak dungeon with no hope for reaching an exit sign.**

So the problem of fear is one of the most serious problems of modern life. It leaves so many people psychologically wrecked and spiritually dejected. It drains one's energy and depletes one's resources. This is why Emerson said, "He has not learned the lesson of life who does not every day surmount a fear."⁶

Now this does not mean that we should seek to eliminate fear altogether from human life. Such an undertaking would not only be humanly impossible but practically undesirable. Fear is the elemental alarm system of the human organism which warns us of approaching dangers.⁷ Without it man could not have survived in the primitive world, nor could he survive in the modern world.

Fear is a powerfully creative force. Every great invention and every

intellectual advance has behind it as a part of its motivation the desire to escape some dreaded thing. The fear of darkness caused man to discover the secret of electricity. The fear of pain led to the marvelous discoveries of medical science. The fear of ignorance was one reason that man built great institutions of learning.⁸ The fear of war was one of the forces behind the birth of the United Nations. Angelo Patri was right in saying, "Education consist in being afraid at the right time."⁹ If we were to take away man's capacity to fear, we would take away his capacity to grow, invent and create. Some fear is normal, necessary, and creative.

But it must be borne in mind that there are abnormal fears which are emotionally ruinous and psychologically destructive. The best illustration of the difference between normal and abnormal fear was given by Sigmund Freud himself. A person tramping through the heart of an African jungle, he said, should quite properly be afraid of snakes. That is normal and self-protective. But if a person suddenly begins to fear that snakes are under the carpet of his city apartment, then his fear is abnormal, neurotic.¹⁰ Are not most of our fears so based? Psychologists tell us that a normal child is born with only two fears—the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises—and all others are environmentally acquired. Most of these acquired fears turn out to be snakes under the carpet.¹¹

When we speak of getting rid of fear we are referring to this chronic abnormal, neurotic fear. Normal fear protects us; abnormal fear paralyzes us. Normal fear is a friend that motivates us to improve our individual and collective welfare; abnormal fear is an enemy that constantly poisons and distorts our inner lives. So our problem is not to get rid of fear but to harness and master it.

How, then, is it to be mastered?

First we must face our fears without flinching. We must honestly ask ourselves why we are afraid. The confrontation will, to some measure, grant us power. We can never cure fear by the method of escapism. Nor can it be cured by repression. The more we attempt to ignore and repress our fears, the more we multiply our inner conflicts **and cause the mind to deteriorate into a slum district.**

Psychiatrists tell us that by looking squarely and honestly at our fears we discover that many of them are the residues of some childhood need or apprehension. Here is a person, for instance, haunted by a fear of death or the thought of punishment in the after life. By honestly facing

this fear the person soon discovers that it is a projection of an early childhood experience of being punished by parents, locked in a room, seemingly deserted. As an adult he unconsciously projected this childhood experience of aloneness and punishment into the whole of reality. Or take the example of the man plagued with the fear of inferiority and social rejection. By looking squarely at this fear he soon discovers that it is rooted in a childhood experience of parental rejection. He was the son of a self-centered mother and a busy, preoccupied father. The mother felt that his coming interfered with her endless social functions. Quietly, and quite unconsciously, he was rejected. In his rejection he felt an enormous bitterness toward life. **In an attempt to express this resentment he engaged in excessive temper tantrums and was severely punished. He found that he could get no attention unless he concealed his bitterness. Conceal it he did. He gained a degree of approval by transforming himself into a dependent, subservient creature who always concealed his true feelings. So he came into maturity with a terrible sense of inadequacy. He had ability of his own, but he was afraid to express it because all of his childhood attempts at self-assertion had brought punishment and rejection. And so by looking at his fears in the light he discovered that they were rooted in unexpressed resentment which, since his childhood; he had repressed.**

So let us take our fears one by one and look at them fairly and squarely. By bringing them to the forefront of consciousness, we may find them to be more imaginary than real. Some of them will turn out to be snakes under the carpet. Let us remember that more often than not, fear involves the misuse of the imagination. By getting our fears in the open we may end up laughing at some of them, and this is good. As one psychiatrist has said: "Ridicule is the master cure for fear and anxiety."¹²

We can master fear not only by facing it and understanding it; we can master it through courage. Courage has always been considered a supreme virtue. Plato considered it that element of the soul which bridges the cleavage between reason and desire. Aristotle considered it the affirmation of one's essential nature. Thomas Aquinas considered it the strength of mind capable of conquering whatever threatens the attainment of the highest good. The stoics considered it the affirmation of one's essential being in spite of desires and anxieties.

So courage is the power of the mind to overcome fear. Fear, unlike

anxiety, has a definite object which can be faced, analyzed, attacked and endured.¹³ So often the object of our fear is fear itself. "Nothing," says Seneca, "is terrible in things except fear itself."¹⁴ And Epictetus says, "for it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of death and hardship."¹⁵ Courage can take the fear produced by a definite object into itself and thereby conquer the fear involved. "Courage," says Paul Tillich, "is self-affirmation 'in spite of' ... that which tends to hinder the self from affirming itself."¹⁶ It is self-affirmation in spite of death and non-being. He who acts courageously takes the fear of death into his self affirmation and acts upon it. This courageous self affirmation which is a sure remedy for fear is not to be confused with "selfishness." Self-affirmation includes the right self-love and the right love of others. Erich Fromm has pointed out in convincing terms that the right self-love and the right love of others are interdependent, and that selfishness and the abuse of others are equally interdependent.¹⁷

Courage is that quality which enables us to stand up to any fear. It is the final determination not to be stopped or overwhelmed by any object, however frightful it may be. Many of our fears are very real, and not mere snakes under the carpet. Trouble is a reality in this strange medley of life and dangers lurk beneath our every move. Accidents do occur and bad health stands as an ever threatening possibility. Death is a stark, grim and inevitable reality. We do ourselves and our neighbors a great disservice when we try to prove that there is nothing in this world to be frightened at. In this conundrum of life evil and pain are inescapable realities. The things that make for fear are close to all of us. These forces that threaten to negate life must be met and challenged by a daring "courage to be." Courage is the power of life to affirm itself in spite of its ambiguities. It involves the exercise of a great and creative will. It is a bottomless resourcefulness that ultimately enables a man to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. Courage is the inner determination to go on in spite of obstacles and frightening situations; cowardice is the submissive surrender to the forces of circumstance. The man of courage never loses the zest for living even though his life situation is zestless; the cowardly man, overwhelmed by the uncertainties of life, loses the will to live. Courage breeds creative self-affirmation; cowardice breeds destructive self-abnegation. Courage faces fear and thereby masters it; cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it. So we must constantly build dykes of courage to ward off the flood of fear.

Fear is also mastered through love. The New Testament is right in saying, “there is no fear in love, but perfect love cast out fear.” Now the word “love” in the New Testament is not something soft, anemic and sentimental. It is a very strong love that could carry Christ to a cross and send Paul sailing unembittered through the angry seas of persecution. It is love facing evil with an infinite capacity to take it without flinching, to overcome the world by the cross.

Now what does all of this have to do with the fears so prevalent in the modern world such as the fear of war, the fear of economic displacement, the fears accompanying racial injustice, and the fears associated with personal anxiety?¹⁸ It has so much to do with them that we can find an illustration at almost any point. Hate is rooted in fear and the only cure for fear-hate is love. Take our deteriorating international situation. It is shot through with the poison darts of fear—Russia fears America and America fears Russia; China fears India and India fears China; the Arabs fear the Israelis and the Israelis fear the Arabs. The fears are numerous and varied—fear of another nation's attack, fear of another nation's scientific and technological supremacy, fear of another nation's economic power, fear of lost status and power. Fear is one of the major causes of war. We usually think that war comes from hate, but a close scrutiny of responses will reveal a different sequence of events—first fear, then hate, then war, then deeper hatred. If a nightmarish nuclear war engulfs our world—God forbid—it will not be because Russia and America first hated each other, but because they first feared each other.

Our method for dealing with this fear has been to arm ourselves to the nth degree. So the two contending camps of the world are engaged in a fever-packed arms race. Expenditures for defense continue to rise to mountain proportions.¹⁹ **Nuclear tests continue to ~~curve~~ carve vertical highways of death through the atmosphere, and atomic submarines continue to cut horizontal pathways of destruction through the rolling seas.** Greater arms will cast out fear, the nations seem to say. But alas! Large armaments have not cast out fear. They have only produced greater fear. So we are called back in these turbulent, panic-stricken days to that wise affirmation of the New Testament: “Perfect love casts out fear.” Greater armaments are not the remedy for fear; only love, understanding and organized goodwill can cast out fear. Or to put it another way, not armanent but disarmament will cast out fear, and disarmament will never become a reality until

enough goodwill and good faith are released to make mutual trust a reality.

Our own problem of racial injustice must be solved by this same formula. The whole system of racial segregation is buttressed by a series of irrational fears—fear of losing a preferred economic position, fear of losing social status, fear of intermarriage, fear of adjusting to a new situation. Numerous white people spend sleepless nights and haggard days attempting to fight these corroding fears. They seek to cast out the fear by diverse methods. Some follow the path of escape. They seek to ignore the question of race relations altogether. They close their minds on this issue and allow nothing to go in or out. Others seek to deal with fear by placing faith in such legal maneuvers as interposition and nullification. They fanatically go down the slippery road of massive resistance. Still others seek to drown the fear by engaging in acts of violence and meanness toward Negroes. **These barbaric acts arose their sense of guilt, and they end up trying to drown the guilt feeling by engaging even more in the guilt evoking act.** But how futile are all of these remedies! Instead of reducing fear, they bring deeper and more pathological fears, fears that leave the victims inflicted with strange psychoses and peculiar cases of paranoia. Neither repression nor massive resistance nor aggressive violence will cast out the fear of integration; only love and goodwill can do that.

If our white brothers are to master fear they must depend not only on their commitment to the way of love but also on the love the Negro generates toward them. Only through our adherence to love and nonviolence can the fear of the white community be mitigated. A guilt-ridden white minority lives in fear that if the Negro should ever attain power, he would act without restraint or pity to revenge the injustices and brutality of the years. It is something like a parent who continually mistreats a son. One day that parent raises his hand to strike the son, only to discover that the son is now as tall as he is. The parent is suddenly afraid—fearful that the son will use his new physical power to repay his parent for all the blows of the past.

The Negro, once a helpless child, has now grown up politically, culturally, and economically. Many white men fear retaliation. The job of the Negro is to show them that they have nothing to fear, that the Negro understands and forgives and is ready to forget the past. He must convince the white man that he seeks justice, for both himself and the white man. A mass movement exercising love and nonviolence is an

object lesson in power under discipline, a demonstration, to the white community that if such a movement attained a degree of strength, it would use its power creatively and not vengefully.

What is the cure, then, of this morbid fear of integration? We know the cure—God help us to achieve it! Love casts out fear.

This truth has a great deal of bearing on our personal anxieties. What are some of us afraid of? We are afraid of the superiority of other people, afraid of failure, afraid that we will be the objects of scorn or disapproval on the part of those whose opinions we value most. Envy, jealousy, a lack of self-confidence, a feeling of insecurity, and a haunting sense of inferiority are all rooted in fear. We are not jealous of people and then fear them; we first fear them and then we become jealous of them. What is the cure for these annoying fears that poison our personal lives? Again it is a deep and abiding commitment to the way of love. “Perfect love casts out fear.”

Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love lights it. **Hatred has chronic eye trouble—it cannot see very far; love has sound eyes—it can see beneath the surface and beyond the outer masks.**

A final way to master fear is through faith. One of the commonest sources of fear is the consciousness of deficient resources and of consequent inadequacy for life. All too many people are attempting to face the tension of life with inadequate inner resources. While on a recent vacation in Mexico, Mrs. King and I rented a boat and went deep sea fishing. Having limited money to spend we rented a rather cheap boat that was old and ill-equipped. At first we gave this no thought. But after getting about ten miles from shore the clouds began to hover low and the howling winds began to blow in fierce fury. Immediately we were afraid because we knew that we had an inadequate boat that was not able to stand strong amid a storm. As we made our way back to the shore we were inflicted every minute with a paralyzing fear. Multitudes of people are in such a situation. Heavy winds, weak boats—they are afraid.

Many of our fears, particularly the abnormal ones, can be dealt with by the skills of psychiatry. This relatively new discipline pioneered by Sigmund Freud is a vital means of investigating the sub-conscious drive of men, and of discovering how and why these fundamental energies are diverted into neurotic channels. It can help us to look unflinchingly at

our inner selves, and with searching fingers to probe out the causes of our failures and fears. Much of our fearful living, however, moves in a realm where the service of psychiatry is ineffectual unless the psychiatrist is a man of religious faith. For the trouble with us is simply that we are attempting to face fear without faith; we are attempting to sail through the stormy seas of life without strong spiritual boats. This is why one of the leading physicians and psychiatrists of America said: "The only known cure for fear is faith."²⁰ The abnormal fears and phobias that express themselves in neurotic anxiety can be cured by psychiatry, but the fear of death, nonbeing and nothingness which expresses itself in existential anxiety can only be cured by a positive religious faith. Such a faith imbues us with a sense of the trustworthiness of the universe, and a feeling of relatedness to God. A positive religious faith does not leave us with the illusion that we will be exempted from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease; rather it instills us with the inner equilibrium to face the strains, burdens and fears that will inevitably come.

Irreligion tells us that we are alone in this strange conundrum of life, orphans thrown out amid the terrifying immensities of space. It leaves us with the idea that the universe is without purpose or intelligence, a **blind mechanism moved by blind forces, that man is the plaything of a callous nature, the accidental product of a fortuitous interplay of atoms and electrons, that history is the tragic arena of never ceasing conflict and the endless cycle of monotonous meaninglessness.** Such a view of life and history drains courage and exhausts the energies of men. **It causes a man to live through the dark night of the soul where the shadows of inner depression are luridly etched in his aimless paths.** He feels something of the aloneness and emptiness that Tolstoi felt before his conversion. In his Confession, he writes:

There was a period in my life when everything seemed to be crumbling, the very foundations of my convictions were beginning to give way, and I felt myself going to pieces. There was no sustaining influence in my life and there was no God there, and so every night before I went to sleep, I made sure that there was no rope in my room lest I be tempted during the night to hang myself from the rafters of my room; and I stopped from going out shooting lest I be tempted to put a quick end to my life and to my misery.²¹

At this stage of his life Tolstoi, like so many people, lacked the sustaining influence which comes from the conviction that this universe is guided by a benign intelligence whose infinite love embraces all mankind.

Religion endows us with the conviction that we are not alone in this vast, uncertain universe. Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days, and the vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God. This universe is not a tragic expression of meaningless chaos but a marvelous display of orderly cosmos—"The Lord hath in wisdom founded the earth, He hath established the heaven in understanding."²² Man is not a wisp of smoke from a limitless smoldering, but a child of God created "a little lower than the angels."²³ Above the manyness of time stands the one eternal God, with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us and love to keep us. His boundless love supports and contains us as {the} a mighty ocean contains and supports the tiny drops of every wave. With a surging fullness he is forever moving toward us, seeking to fill the little creeks and bays of our lives with unlimited resources. This is religion's everlasting diapason, its eternal answer to the enigma of existence. Any man who finds this cosmic sustenance can walk the highways of life without the fatigue of pessimism and the weight of morbid fears.

Herein lies the answer to the neurotic fear of death that plagues so many of our lives. Let us face the fear that the atomic bomb has aroused with the faith that we can never travel beyond the arms of the Divine. Death is inevitable. It is a democracy for all of the people not an aristocracy for some of the people—kings die and beggars die; young men die and old men die; learned men die and ignorant men die. We need not fear it. The God who brought our whirling planet from primal vapor and has led the human pilgrimage for low these many centuries can most assuredly lead us through death's dark night into the bright daybreak of ~~eternity~~ eternal life. His will is too perfect and his purposes are too extensive to be contained in the limited receptacle of time and the narrow walls of earth. Death is not the ultimate evil; the ultimate evil is to be outside God's love. We need not join the mad rush to purchase an earthly fallout shelter. God is our eternal fallout shelter.

Jesus always stressed the trustworthiness and love of God when he dealt with the problem of fear. He knew that nothing could separate man from God's love. In the tenth chapter of Matthew we read his majestic words:

Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be

revealed; and hid, that shall not be known... And fear not them which kill the body; but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.²⁴

Man, for Jesus, is not mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life. He is a child of God, and it is unreasonable to assume that God whose creative activity is expressed even in such details as the hairs of a man's head, would exclude from his concern the life of man himself.²⁵ The idea that God is mindful of the individual is of tremendous value in dealing with the poisonous disease of fear. It gives one a sense of worth, belonging and at-homeness in the universe.

During the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, one of the most dedicated participants was an elderly Negro woman that we affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the movement. Once she was asked several weeks of walking whether she was tired. "My feets is tired," she answered, "but my soul is rested." This was just one example of her ungrammatical profundity. One Monday evening, after having gone through a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening calls, I went to the mass meeting depressed and fear-stricken. In my address I tried desperately to give an overt impression of strength and courage, **but deep down within the soil of my inner life was the nagging serpent of fear which left me poisoned with the fangs of depression.** At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, "Come here son." I immediately walked over and gave her a big hug. Then she said "something is wrong with you. You didn't talk strong tonight." Seeking to keep my fears to myself I retorted, "Oh, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever." "Now you can't fool me," she said; "I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain't doing things to please you? or is it that the white folks is bothering you?" Before I could answer she looked directly into my eyes and said, "I don told you we is with you all the way." And then with a countenance beaming with quiet certainty she concluded, "but even if we aint with you, God's gonna take care of you." Everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when she uttered these consoling words.

Mother Pollard has now passed on to glory. Since that dreary night in 1956 I have known very few quiet days. I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation. Day in and day out I have been forced to stand up amid howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity. **Times without number I have learned that life has not only sun-lit moments of joy but also fog-packed moments of sorrow;** but as the years have unfolded the majestic words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace to **the hinterlands** of my troubled soul. "God's gonna take care of you." This is the faith that can transform the whirlwind of despair into the soothing breeze of hope. There is an old familiar motto which says: "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. There was no one there."²⁶