

“Boo!”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

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What’s the verdict? Were our munchkins scary or endearing? Were you scared? I recall one Halloween when the sweetest child in my daughter’s kindergarten class showed up at our front door as the headless horseman! And how about the chocolate distributed by our youngsters this morning? It’s enough to make one a Fair Trade chocoholic! I think that’s cause for rational fear.

I remember the Halloween of October 2001, a time when fear catapulted our reason beyond almost anything experienced within the borders of this nation in recent years. On October 31 our niece, Stephanie, gave birth to a rather large baby boy. Casey weighed in at 10 pounds 11 ounces, a sizable pumpkin for a newborn. I suppose one could call that scary, but Casey’s far more disarming than he is scary. A few weeks shy of this third birthday, he was asked what he was going to be for Halloween. He replied simply: “Three!” Pumpkins come in all sizes, and this one continues to grow as he now intercepts passes and charges into end zones. Our own pumpkins [referring to our children, who processed earlier this morning in costume] come in all sizes and grow into our hearts.

I take great pleasure in Halloween. How I remember the Halloweens of my small-town childhood. Donned in our hand-crafted costumes, my friends and I made our way from house to house, stuffing into our pillowcase bags the likes of popcorn balls, brownies, even homemade fudge. The treats changed over the years as a few bad apples became toxic and the climate turned from hospitable to otherwise. Even then, I anticipated every Halloween when I could cart my own young daughters off to the local fabric store and plot together the identity with which they too would make their way from porch light to porch light, as I stood on the sidewalk as security backup. What eager goblins they were, with their excited smiles and rosy cheeks. Yes, I delight in Halloween, or All Hallows e’en, the evening before All Hallows Day known now as All Saints Day, followed by All Souls Day. What a textured time it is.

The rites of Halloween spring from a pagan harvest festival known as *Samhain*, an Old Irish term for “summer’s end.” *Samhain*—“Sow-in” or “Sa-ven”—marked the dying of the season of light. It brought to mind the reality of human death. How easy it is to imagine that in this crack of time between the season of dark and the season of light, the dead come back for a visit. So what did those early Celts do? They honored the dead, while building huge bonfires to keep any evil spirits at a distance. Centuries later these rituals continue with youngsters carving scary faces into vegetables like turnips and pumpkins and dressing up in scary costumes to keep the scarier spirits away. In this country, scary costumes often give way to cherubs in tutus, toddlers as monkeys and frogs, and a veritable Halloween host of action heroes.

I revel in the trick-or-treating of our youngsters this morning—a reverse trick-or-treating, giving each of you a sample of fair trade chocolate with a message explaining why fair trade matters. As they go from their own porch light to porch light later this week, we can count on their hosts experiencing a wholly different message upon opening their doors. Where’s the scary in these costumed charmers bearing chocolate and a message of what’s fair and what’s not?

As for today, I ask myself and I ask you: What's fair and what's not? What's scary and what's not?

Whatever your perspective, the election at hand is rife with matters of fair and matters of fear. Both are played on and with in how America will be kept safe from whatever without a word about how the whomevers might be kept safe from America. Both permeate discourse civil and uncivil on who will and who won't receive health care and how. Both fuel proposals from equitable to banal on restoring the economy in the form of jobs for the middle class with no mention of jobs for the down-and-out poor. Both lace the harsh realities of desperate neighbors crossing borders and by what means they're allowed to stay and by what means they're turned back, or worse. What a time it is to pay close attention.

Recall the proclamation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" It was in his First Inaugural Address that he spoke these words that have outlasted their context. 1932 marked the year of his campaign against Herbert Hoover. Just three years earlier the stock market had crashed. The Great Depression had arrived in full force. In his address to the nation as he took office Roosevelt moved from a tone of reassuring rhetoric in his campaign to the harsh realities that lay ahead.

"I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our people impel. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that *the only thing we have to fear is fear itself* [my italics]—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror, which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves, which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days.

He continued:

"... a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return.

.... Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of the supply. Primarily this is because the rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and abdicated. Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men."

The time that is now is not quite history repeating itself. The "rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed," but they have yet to admit their failure and have surely not abdicated. Nor have they stood aptly "indicted in the court of public opinion." How many thousands of families are still "underwater" with mortgages negotiated on terms of deceit whitewashed by what has become "the American dream" in which the poorest of the poor and even the middle class identify, not with one another, but with the richest of the rich? How many

thousands have been cast into poverty by succumbing to the temptations of becoming rich, lured by entrepreneurial sociopaths? How many millions are jobless thanks to corporate outsourcing and cheaper labor abroad?

Whom can we believe? Whom can we trust? What do we care about so passionately that we will risk whatever power we have and whatever privilege we cleave to in order to redeem values of clear talk, honest transactions, democratic process, and the will to freedom from fear?

BOO!

Whether playfully shouted on Halloween Night or powerfully insinuated in platforms political and, yes, theological, “BOO” is a tactic of diversion. Its intention is to startle, to take one off course. We know how delightful it can be when we’re startled by our youngsters donned in costumes letting them play—play knowingly—with who they are. And we know how daunting it can be when we’re seduced by figures of power donned in their own costumes, counting on fear being at home as they knock on doors of the unaware.

Societally fear is a tactic geared to divert one from the vigilance called for by love. Theologically fear is a tactic geared to divert one from the compassionate presence called for by love. My friend and mentor, the late Forrest Church, proclaimed again and again, right into the days that he knew were his final days, that “the opposite of love is not hate, it’s fear.”

The antidote to fear is love—not a fluffy la-la land love, but the hard core love of caring about our neighbor as much as we do ourselves and affirming in our behavior that every one, every single creature alive on this planet, is our neighbor. Your fate is my fate is her fate is his fate is our fate.

We’re joined more integrally than we commonly care to know. One way to affirm this is through communal resistance to this culture of fear, a resistance grounded in hope that the behavior of love—also known as empathy, solidarity, compassionate justice, and caring behavior—endures, no matter what winds blow over the next few days and the next few weeks. If we breathe, we hope, and if we hope, we are vigilant, and if we are vigilant, we can resist fear, and when we resist fear, love is there.

It’s never too late to live into the hope for what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described as the beloved community—not the flaunted ego, not the success of the market, not the hubris that infuses “exclusive” as something to aspire to, but community, beloved, mutual, respectful, sacred community.

There’s a lot that’s scary on the eve of storms, but this is not a time to let fear divert us. This is our time for communal vigilance. This is our time to cross the otherwise terrifying chasms between the known and the unknown, between winners take all and enough for all, between despair and hope, fear and love. The hope and promise of beloved community were not the ravings of a preacher whose time had come, but the vision of one who declared that this is our time.

The poetic wisdom of May Sarton is ripe:

...Disarmed, too vulnerable, full of dread,
And once again as naked as the trees
Before the dark, precarious days ahead
And troubled skies over tumultuous seas.

...How to believe that all will not be lost?
Our flowers, too, not perish in the blight?
Love, leave me your South against the frost.
Say "hush" to my fears, and warm the night.

Amen

Sources:

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 1933.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/>

May Sarton, "Late Autumn," from *Halfway to Silence, New Poems by May Sarton*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980, reprinted by permission of the publisher in *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality*, Edited by Marilyn Sewell, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Souls_Day