

The Power of Fear

Written by Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I.

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“Fear is the heartbeat of the powerless.” So writes Cor de Jonghe. That’s true. We can deal with almost everything, except fear.



“Fear is the heartbeat of the powerless.” So writes Cor de Jonghe. That’s true. We can deal with almost everything, except fear.

The late Belgian spiritual writer, Bieke Vandekerckhove, in her very fine book, *The Taste of Silence*, shared very honestly about the demons that beset her as she faced a terminal illness at age 19. She singled out three particular demons that tormented her as she faced the prospect of death—sadness, anger, and fear—and she suggested that we can more easily cope with the first two, sadness and anger, than we can with the third, fear. Here’s her insight:

Sadness can be handled through tears, through grieving. Sadness fills us like a warm glass, but a glass can be emptied. Tears can also numbness of the line. We have all, no doubt, experienced the release, the catharsis, that can come through tears. Tears can soften the heart and take away the bitterness of sadness, even while its bitterness remains. Sadness, no matter how heavy, has a release valve. So too does anger. Anger can be expressed and its very expression helps release it so that it flows out of us. No doubt we’ve had other experiences like this. The emotion, if intense, is that overpowering anger and giving it release seemed to be useful when hurt others, which is the management danger when dealing with anger. With anger we have many outlets. We can shout it out, beat a drum, punch a bag, or probably physically exercise with us’ exhausted, smelly, some dentures, after midnight thoughts, and’ top away at countless things. This isn’t necessarily rational and some of these things aren’t necessarily moral, but they offer some release. We have more to cope with anger.

Fear, on the other hand, has no such release valve. Most often, there’s nothing we can do to lighten or release it. Fear paralyzes us, and this paralysis is the very thing that robs us of the strength we would need to combat it. We can hear a drum, rage in profanity at any time, but fear remains. Moreover, unlike anger, fear cannot be taken out on someone else, even though we sometimes try to expunge it. But, in the end, it doesn’t work. The object of our fear doesn’t go away simply because we wish it away. Fear can only be confronted. We have to live with it until it weakens its own. Sometimes, on the Book of Lamentations suggests, all we can do is to put our trust in the Lord and wait. With fear, sometimes all we can do is endure.

What’s the lesson in this?

In her memoir, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova recounts an encounter she once had with another woman, as the result of their meeting outside a Russian prison. Both of them had already had been imprisoned by Stalin, and both of them were famous for being believers and for keeping to their hearts, or were a member of other women. But the woman was like something out of the existential literature of the absurd.

The situation was bizarre. First of all, the women were from different times, and some quality variations as to whether the letters and postcards they were daily writing would ever be given to their loved ones in the gulag. Moreover, the gulag world, without reason, made them wait for hours in the snow and cold before they would collect their letters and postcards, and sometimes they wouldn’t meet the women at all. Still, every week, despite the absurdity, the women would come, wait in the snow, accept the unfairness, do their right, and try to get letters and postcards and other loved ones. One morning, as they were waiting, morning with no end in sight, one of the women recognized Akhmatova and said to her: “Well, you’re a poet. Can you tell me what’s happening here?” Akhmatova looked at the woman and replied, “Yes, I am.” And then something like a smile passed between them.

Why the smile? Just to be able to name something—no matter how absurd or unfair, no matter how painful—seems to change it—in to be something less of it, allow it, to become less in some way. To name something correctly is to partly free ourselves of its dominance. That’s why totalitarian regimes fear artists, writers, religious critics, journalists, and prophets. They name things. That’s why the theocracy of prophets. Prophets don’t bend the knee, they properly name the present. Existential teacher Richard Rohr is fond of saying, “The only thing that can be fixed or cured, but it should be named properly.”

Psychologist James Hillman had his own way of stating this: “An organism suffers most when it doesn’t know where it belongs.”

This can be helpful in dealing with fear in our lives. Fear can render us impotent. But naming it properly, recognizing where that organism belongs and how generous it becomes, can help us to live with it, without sadness and anger.

Read with gratitude of the author: [Bieke Vandekerckhove](#)



Father Ron Rolheiser has inspired many people with his wisdom and insights through his excellent knowledge in spirituality, theology, and philosophy. He has become a popular speaker in the area of contemporary spirituality and religion and the secular world. Father Ron still is very involved in the life of his large extended family, enjoying the annual liturgies and New Year's celebrations. Most Christmas you will find him in the home church, St. Dominic, near the former family farm in Carleton Place, Ontario. Currently, he is serving as president of the Ottawa School of Theology in St. Antonio, Ontario. We can be contacted through his website: [rolheiser.com](#). His articles, sermons and other opinions have published on [http://www.rolheiser.com](#).

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The late Belgian spiritual writer, Bieke Vandekerckhove, in her very fine book, *The Taste of Silence*, shared very honestly about the demons that beset her as she faced a terminal illness at age 19. She singled out three particular demons that tormented her as she faced the prospect of death—sadness, anger, and fear—and she suggested that we can more easily cope

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with the first two, sadness and anger, than we can with the third, fear. Here's her thought:

Sadness can be handled through tears, through grieving. Sadness fills us like a water glass, but a glass can be emptied. Tears can drain sadness of its bite. We have all, no doubt, experienced the release, the catharsis, that can come through tears. Tears can soften the heart and take away the bitterness of sadness, even while its heaviness remains. Sadness, no matter how heavy, has a release valve. So too does anger. Anger can be expressed and its very expression helps release it so that it flows out of us. No doubt too we have also experienced this. The caution, of course, is that in expressing anger and giving it release we need to be careful not to hurt others, which is the ever-present danger when dealing with anger. With anger we have many outlets: We can shout in rage, beat a drum, punch a bag, use profanity, physically exercise until we're exhausted, smash some furniture, utter murderous threats, and rage away at countless things. This isn't necessarily rational and some of these things aren't necessarily moral, but they offer some release. We have means to cope with anger.

Fear, on the other hand, has no such release valves. Most often, there's nothing we can do to lighten or release it. Fear paralyzes us, and this paralysis is the very thing that robs us of the strength we would need to combat it. We can beat a drum, rage in profanity, or cry tears, but fear remains. Moreover, unlike anger, fear cannot be taken out on someone else, even though we sometimes try, by scapegoating. But, in the end, it doesn't work. The object of our fear doesn't go away simply because we wish it away. Fear can only be suffered. We have to live with it until it recedes on its own. Sometimes, as the Book of Lamentations suggests, all we can do is to put our mouth to the dust and wait. With fear, sometimes all we can do is endure.

What's the lesson in this?

In her memoirs, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova recounts an encounter she once had with another woman, as the two of them waited outside a Russian prison. Both of their husbands had been imprisoned by Stalin, and both of them were there to bring letters and packages to their husbands, as were a number of other women. But the scene was like something out of the existential literature of the absurd. The situation was bizarre. First of all, the women were unsure of whether their husbands were even still alive, and were equally uncertain as to whether the letters and packages they were delivering would ever be given to their loved ones by the guards. Moreover, the guards would, without reason, make them wait for hours in the snow and cold before they would collect their letters and packages, and sometimes they wouldn't meet the women at all. Still, every week, despite the absurdity, the women would come, wait in the snow, accept this unfairness, do their vigil, and try to get letters and packages to their loved ones. One morning, as they were waiting, seemingly with no end in sight, one of

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the women recognized Akhmatova and said to her: “Well, you’re a poet. Can you tell me what’s happening here?” Akhmatova looked at the woman and replied, “Yes, I can!” And then something like a smile passed between them.

Why the smile? Just to be able to name something— no matter how absurd or unfair, no matter our powerlessness to change it—is to be somehow free of it, above it, transcendent in some way. To name something correctly is to partly free ourselves of its dominance. That’s why totalitarian regimes fear artists, writers, religious critics, journalists, and prophets. They name things. That’s ultimately the function of prophecy. Prophets don’t foretell the future, they properly name the present. Ecumenical teacher Richard Rohr is fond of saying, “Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it should be named properly.” Psychologist James Hillman had his own way of casting this: “A symptom suffers most when it doesn’t know where it belongs.”

This can be helpful in dealing with fear in our lives. Fear can render us impotent. But naming it properly, recognizing where that symptom belongs and how powerless it leaves us, can help us to live with it, without sadness and anger.



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