

WHY ARE WE AFRAID?

How can I ever find true peace of mind, people are asking, when:

- I am afraid every time I kiss my family good-bye that I may never see them again;
- I am afraid for my son to fly home from college for the holidays;
- I am afraid to go to concert halls, or stadiums, or arenas;
- I am afraid of foreign people living in my neighborhood or at my place of work;
- I am afraid to turn on the news;
- I am afraid to drink water from the tap, or breathe the air in public buildings;
- I am afraid of the future because I can't get the past off my mind ...

We have all struggled with heightened fears in the past three weeks. Living free and at ease looks more tenuous than it did before September 11. Routine activities seem marbled with unseen dangers. Promises of a carefree childhood are difficult to make to our sons and daughters. The things we used to worry about seem trivial and obsolete.

Logically, we know the world is no more or less safe than it was a month ago. It isn't that we were living in an utterly peaceful world untouched by terror a month ago. It is that we had our minds on other things and so the potential for terror was "invisible" to most people. The terror in the world, the threat of terror escalating, the terrible plots being formed, and the consequences that terror would engender were not in our thinking. Now, they are. A month ago, most of us thought we were safe, and therefore we felt safe and confidently went about our lives. Now many think we are not safe, and therefore we feel endangered and have difficulty being confident about our lives.

Logically, we know we might actually be safer today than we were a month ago; the world's attention is now on safekeeping and the nation's attention is now on keeping us safe. Logic has nothing to do with experience, though. Logic governs the course of events; our own thinking governs our experience of those events.

People who are afraid view other people who are not afraid with skepticism. Yet as I talk to people who regained their equanimity quickly in September, they all express the same simple wisdom about it. Our only certainty is to live each day until we die. Our only certainty is to live in our own few pages of history. Our only absolute certainty is right now, this moment. Our only choice is to create our experience of living one "now" at a time, moment-to-moment-to-moment, with the thinking we bring to mind forming our experience.

To me, safety, and thus true peace of mind, comes from knowing that uncertainty about everything beyond this moment is our fate. We do not know, in the shadow of September 11, any more than we knew before what will happen after we say good-bye to our

families, after our sons get on an airplane to come home, after we enter a stadium, a concert hall or an arena, after we interact with people from other nations, after we turn on the news, after we drink tap water or breathe, after our thoughts are consumed by huge, frightening events which could happen. We only know that the way we experience life events unfolding is created within our own minds. As we change our minds, we change our experience of our fate.

No event, no matter how horrific, can master a free mind, which is alive with the power to move to the next thought. But any one of us can give away the freedom of our minds indefinitely to our thoughts about any event, and cast the energy of thinking, like a beam of light, in one and only one direction until it looks like the only direction there is and we become mesmerized by one set of impressions.

What an extraordinary power we have to direct our own thinking and then live in the personal world we have made with it! The evidence of this power is potent right now because the shattering tragedy of September 11 has brought it into sharp focus. Some of us put everything in our lives on hold, filling our heads with frightening images of imagined new terror. Some of us resume our lives, filling our heads with curiosity and engagement in life today. Some focus on finding deeper appreciation for every opportunity to enjoy every precious moment. Some focus on watching for everything that could go wrong and expecting the worst.

Crisis makes it more than usually clear that our thinking, not events, determines our responses to life. Last week I became involved in a heart-rending microcosm of our global distress. In Providence, Rhode Island, a beautiful young man of great promise, much beloved by family and friends, was murdered in a drive-by shooting. He was not the shooters' intended target. His grief-stricken parents immediately cast the radiance of forgiveness, compassion and faith on the event that tore into their family and begged his friends, begged the city, not to answer senseless violence with more senseless violence. They pleaded for understanding that would use this awful killing as leverage to stop violence. Yet young men went into the streets to seek revenge and shot three people anyway, compelled by their own anguished anger. The drive-by shooting did not cause forgiveness, nor did it cause vengeance. The parents' call for calm did not cause peace, nor did it cause aggression. Each event crystallized the thoughts of those it touched, and each person touched created a unique experience of it and a unique response to it, with the power of their own minds.

When I and a colleague who were in Providence at the time were asked to help people understand their despair, our hope was to point to thinking as an ability, directed by the thinker, and to the remarkable power we have to use that ability to find the wisdom to learn from life – or to use that ability to lose ourselves in habitual reactions to life. It is too late, after the fact, to change the fate we have created with a formed thought. We can only create new thoughts and take a new direction. If a person forms ideas of vengeance,

that person feels and acts vengefully. If a person forms ideas of forgiveness, that person feels and acts mercifully. But before a person forms an idea, there is a choice point, a shimmering spiritual moment of possibility from which any idea might arise. Those moments are infinitely available to us. No one can become stuck within any thought without using their thinking to keep it on their minds.

I have been reminded frequently of a poem by Wallace Stevens that I have always loved, which seems to me to be a perfect metaphor for the way our thinking organizes our experience. It is called “Anecdote of the Jar.”

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.*

*It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

Our thinking is the act of placing the jar. We organize the chaotic information of life according to where we place it. The jar is neutral, just as thinking is a neutral power; all the information is in the “scene” it organizes for us. But once we place it, we are “surrounded” only with the reality within the purview of the jar.

The gift that allows us to form new realities and continually progress towards our heartfelt dreams is not the gift of changing the bird or the bush, altering life events or changing things outside of us. It is the gift of discovering infinite ways to place the jar.

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