
CHASTENINGS

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Dear friends,

During this financial crisis many people have asked for insight and advice on how to think about what we are going through, and have wondered what religious and spiritual teachings offer at times like this. I have struggled to find something meaningful to say in answer to these questions, and, frankly, this has been difficult because I also feel great stress and uncertainty. With two boys in college, a dwindling 401k (on the bright side; with two kids in college, I didn't have much saved, so not much to lose), and the possibility that projects might be put on hold or canceled, I too am feeling fearful. Here in New York City, we feel this fear most acutely. In a fearful state of mind, it is difficult to find wisdom because when strong, raw, negative emotions arise, our self-created defenses go up, dampening our deeper knowing, and unseating our sense of confidence and connection.

Today's cover of the *New York Post* was filled with Franklin Roosevelt's famous words, "All we have to fear is fear itself." Everyone knows these words, and we understand the intention of his warning: We must face fear directly because the fear of fear leads to more fear. Fear, though, is a powerful emotion and is embedded in our very make-up as physical beings. There are times when fear is reasonable and motivates us toward action or self-protection. You'd be in great danger if you felt no fear

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at all, and without reasonable fear, we can act recklessly. (Perhaps this is one of the roots of our current crisis—individuals acting from the arrogant, irresponsible belief that their reckless actions would have no consequences, and with no fear of hurting others or themselves.) We experience problems, though, when, out of a sense of insecurity or powerlessness, we feel fearful of things that are either not inherently dangerous or that we cannot do anything about. Then, as FDR noted, fear becomes a downward spiral, leading to panic and paralysis. So, what to do?

Useful spiritual teachings about how to respond to this type of fear can help you. Most of these teachings recommend a three-fold approach that addresses all aspects of our being: body, mind, and spirit—as expressed in action, thought, and faith. The Talmud incorporates this approach when it advises:

*If a man sees that painful suffering visits him,
let him examine his conduct [body/action]....
If he examines and finds nothing, let him
attribute it to the neglect of study [mind/
thought].... If he did attribute thus, and still
did not find anything, let him be sure that
these are the chastening of love
[spirit/faith]....*

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Let's take a quick look at this approach.

- **Action:** We are physical beings and are built for action. In fearful situations, when there is no clear action that can be taken, though, we might be tempted to hide, freeze, or simply give up, waiting for the perceived danger to pass. The problem with this reaction is that, like the proverbial deer and headlights, if we stand still we can be run over by oncoming events. In fearful times we need to keep moving and stay focused on our goals and obligations. We might even need to redouble our efforts because there is both more resistance, and more opportunity, in fearful times. Lao Tzu's famous aphorism that "a journey of a thousand miles [a long, difficult endeavor] begins with a single step," speaks directly to this point. The often missed implication, however, is that the journey requires millions of consistent, determined steps after this initial one. There is no promise that the journey will be easy and smooth, but there is a requirement to keep moving if we hope to reach the destination.
- **Thought:** Fear is a product of the mind in reaction to a perceived threat. All spiritual traditions teach that we can have absolute control over our mind and its reactions, and that we can choose to react either with pessimism and fear, or with optimism and courage. For many

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(yours-truly included) this can be difficult to put into practice because after many years of the same patterned responses, we can believe that our reactions are simply natural responses to events. We know, though, that individuals react differently to the same stimuli because how we view ourselves, the world, and the people in it dramatically colors our reactions to events. The teaching on how to overcome this is relatively simple: Use your mind to gather information, and evaluate the situation as objectively as possible. This can allow you to react to the facts, instead of your perceptions or inclinations. Also, become conscious of your internal mental dialogue, and challenge fear-based assumptions against reality. If dramatic action is needed, you then can take it based on information, not reactionary fear.

- **Faith:** When we face difficult times, the Talmudic teaching encourages us to first examine our actions and then our thoughts. This is a practical approach that allows us to be effective in the physical realm. If control of body and mind are not enough to address the fear, this teaching directs us of the conscious support of faith. Although we might not understand why fearful events are unfolding, faith in the proposition that we are watched, guided, and protected, and that our lives are purposeful and meaningful, gives us confidence and peace.

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“The chastening of love” are the stresses in our lives that, presented to us in grace, lead to growth. Like a parent who insists that her child turn off the TV (or log off of Facebook) and put down the Snickers bar to exercise, study, get restful sleep, and eat good food, we are often restrained and challenged, out of a love that desires our healthy development. We always emerge stronger after difficult times, and, as history has taught us, so, ultimately, does the world.

We are clearly entering difficult times, and, for many of us, the great uncertainty of this situation naturally provokes fear. I hope that these teachings are helpful to you in providing a framework in which to conceptualize, experience, and respond to what you are feeling.

As always,
Wishing you well,
Alan