

Sara Whitestone

The Nature of Fear

“Perhaps the wilderness we fear is the pause within our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace.”

—Terry Tempest Williams

I was hiking alone one summer afternoon on a remote path high up on North Mountain in West Virginia when I suddenly heard a crash overhead. I stopped and looked up, thinking maybe it was a group of turkey vultures taking flight or a bald eagle disturbed from his roost. But instead of birds flying away from me, something large and black was falling towards me. Then it thumped to the ground right in front of me.

My first thought was, *bears don't land on their feet like cats?* My surprise was arrested by the bear's eyes, which, wide with fear, connected with mine. But before I could blink, the bear jumped to his feet and galloped away down the path.

I stood transfixed. Why had the bear shown such fear? Did he associate his pain from the impact of his fall with me? Did he feel exposed—vulnerable—as he was splayed out on the forest floor, while I, who in comparison weighed much less, loomed over him?

I looked up and saw a dead tree. On the ground was a huge, hollow branch. The bear must have been sitting on that limb in the tree and shifted his weight too quickly when he sensed me approaching. He had fallen about fifteen feet. I contemplated the trail in the direction the bear had thundered off. How likely was it for me to meet him again? Although I felt curious and unafraid, my hand was shaking. I had a hard time releasing the pepper spray

from where it was clipped to my pack. Then, after a few deep breaths, I moved forward, feeling empowered.

Even though I often hike alone, I only recently felt the need to carry pepper spray. To me, strolling on my own in the woods feels much safer than being in a big city. When I was nineteen and traveling alone on my way to visit my sister in Germany, I took a side trip to Paris. During the middle of the day, I decided to walk to the Eiffel Tower. A small man in his late twenties wearing a black leather jacket and black leather pants came up to me and started to take off his studded belt. He gestured at me, said something in French, and then pointed to himself below his belt. “Oui?” he said, hopefully. “NO.” I said back, loudly. “No?” he said. His face actually puckered into a pout. I looked around. A young couple, holding hands, was close by. “NO,” I said again, and then walked quickly toward the couple, finding the safety that numbers afford. The man melted away.

Give me nature over humans any day. There is a balance in nature that, while it may not always be predictable, is at least not malicious or sexually predacious. While I wish I would have had pepper spray in Paris that day, I had never felt a need for it in the forest. Still, when a friend suggested that I buy some as a precaution (“against bears,” he said), I told him I would think about it.

It wasn't bears that made me change my mind about carrying pepper spray in my pack, though. One day I was walking for a couple of hours on a seldom-traveled trail when a rough looking man in his forties appeared with his scruffy dog from the shadows ahead. The man wasn't wearing shoes made for walking, and he was dressed in a flannel shirt, even though it was a warm spring day. These put me on the alert. This was not

someone who was an outdoorsman. Most of the time, I feel an almost immediate kinship with those I pass on the trail. I look into their faces as I move aside to give them room on the path, and there is something in them—their openness, their obvious enjoyment of their surroundings—that makes me trust that, if we had time to converse, I would soon find them friends.

This man was not that sort of person. His eyes were almost hidden under his bandana, so I couldn't read his expression. But something wasn't right. For the first time in nature, I felt how small and alone I really was. It is humans, not animals, who rape, feeding on the terror their power inflicts on victims—men attacking women, adults abusing children—an imbalance of power, the physically stronger preying on the weaker. I had no idea what kind of human this man in the forest was. He wanted to stand and chat about the steepness of the trail, but I moved past him quickly. After that hike, I bought the pepper spray, and I was glad I had it when that bear landed right in front of me.

But no simple spray can of protectant could have restored the balance of power in the situation I faced in my first teaching job. At age twenty-one, I was hired as the sixth-grade instructor at a small, private elementary school in rural Pennsylvania. The principal, over twenty years my senior, was clearly attracted to me. At first, he enjoyed observing my classes, saying how well I handled the students and commenting on how becoming I was in certain outfits. Then, as I became more confident in my teaching and began to gently question his demeanor towards me, my principal felt rebuffed. He started to bully me, criticizing me for wearing “form-fitting” pants and for my poor classroom management and irresponsibility toward my students. By the end of my second year at the

school, the principal had convinced the governing board that I should not be rehired.

Do we, as humans, clothe ourselves in power in order to mask the fear that cowers within? It could be that this principal was afraid of his attraction to me and was intimidated by the fact that I questioned his motives. Was his need for control so strong that he was willing to try to ruin my career to prove his dominance? Is there a point where fear ends and the hunger for power, along with the pleasure of causing others pain, takes over? A friend once told me about how he had observed his cat slowly bring a rabbit to its death. First, the cat disabled the rabbit's hind legs. Then he stopped the attack and nonchalantly washed himself while his prey tried to squirm away. For the next half hour, the cat alternated between grooming himself (all the while watching his rabbit writhe) and playing with his quarry, until, finally, he ended the rabbit's agony. I was the principal's rabbit at that school. From that pain, I promised myself that I would never let fear and the lust for power motivate me to bring hurt to others.

Sometimes we forget the promises we made when we were young. Almost twenty-five years later, I was walking around the lake near the university where I teach. There must have been fifty ducks on the sidewalk close to the water—some standing idle on one foot, some dozing with their beaks resting against their chests. I hadn't had a bad morning, really. Just an ordinary one that makes you wish for something more exciting to come along and carry you away. My recent encounters with the bear and the man in the forest had fueled buried memories of my past—times in my life when I had been manipulated by those who were bigger, stronger, and more powerful.

As I looked at the ducks, an impulse welled up in me. I ran at them, taking pleasure in watching them

scatter in fear, falling over each other before plunging into the lake, making wakes like small boats as they motored away. The first forty or so bobbed in the water. There were ten stragglers. I rushed at them, too, laughing as they dove in after the others.

I stopped laughing when I saw, in their mad race to get out of my way, that a baby and his mother had lost each other. Close to the bank where he had dropped into the water, the chick spun in a small circle, his tiny beak opening and closing with a frantic peep-peep-peep. All of the ducks in his proximity ignored him. I stayed and watched as long as I could, hoping for a family reunion. The chick was still peeping in panic when I finally had to leave.

At my break between classes, I hurried back out to the lake. The first thing I saw as I scanned the water was a duckling floating sideways—dead. It had only been three hours since my assault. Was it possible that my chick had experienced a heart attack from its fright? I had read how Audubon had learned from Davy Crocket how to shoot the bark off trees right above birds' heads, literally scaring them to death. When they fell to the ground, Audubon gained intact specimens for his study. But I was no Audubon. I had no desire to study this specimen floating in the water in front of me.

I had to force myself to look more closely. This duckling was much larger than my tiny orphan. I was not a murderer after all. Even so, my guilt hadn't changed; I was still experiencing the painful consequences of the abuse of power.

I had done exactly what I had vowed never to do. I took all those times that others had intimidated me mentally in order to control me, and all the times when my primal instincts had kicked in because I was afraid for

my physical safety, and turned them into a cruel impulse to dominate something weaker than I. And worse than that, I had enjoyed that fleeting rush of power. But I was not feeling very powerful as I walked half way around the lake on my lunch hour, straining my eyes for the chick I was now responsible for.

Finally, his peeping guided me to him. All those hours later, he was still spinning in that frantic circle. I was standing on a bridge, feeling helpless, when another little fluff of bird swam out from under the bridge and joined my orphan. Was it his brother? They paddled in a circle and peeped together. Then from behind me, I heard some plops. Four babies, and yes, to my great relief, a mother, emerged from under the bridge. As I watched the chicks form a line behind the female and swim out toward the center of the lake, the peeping suddenly stopped. My waning sense of responsibility convinced me that this was indeed my lost baby returned home.

When faced with fear, the natural world teaches us that animals and humans alike have three options: fight to gain dominance, flee from danger, or freeze while under attack. These are all forms of self-preservation. Primal fear—the urge to defend our physical lives—allows us strength to face immediate danger. Maybe constructed fear—the idea that we are losing control in our mental, emotional, or spiritual lives—also evolves from that primal motivation of self-preservation. We flex our muscles and ruffle our feathers so that we don't lose our reputations, our places in the social pecking order. We run away from what we do not understand, and, as a result, cannot hope to control. We play dead because we are paralyzed by the thought that we might make mistakes, or lose command of our actions.

At the time my principal was attacking me, it

seemed I only had those three choices. I could fight back, charging him with a sexual harassment lawsuit. I could run, leaving the situation before the school year was over. Or I could be rendered ineffectual in my teaching because I was too afraid to do anything that would cause more problems. I chose the third. I got through the rest of the year as best I could, but my trust in myself as a teacher was damaged. I wondered if, as the principal predicted, I might never get another teaching job.

Are fighting, fleeing, or freezing really the only three choices we have when we are afraid? Or could there be a fourth way—a way that takes more bravery than any of the others; a way that both asks for, and grants, grace; a way that opens to joy rather than closes in fear?

Fear destroys our energy and steals our joy. Even though it would have been my right to pursue my principal legally—to dominate him in the courtroom—that action would have kept my focus on the negative situation, robbing me of the energy to move forward in my teaching career. And although the studded-belt man marred the pleasure of my first adventure in Paris, I have since found happiness in many other travels and on many other trails—determined not to let fear hold me back from embracing life.

One day, while hiking a trail in the Shenandoah National Park, I was occupied with these ideas of how to better embrace life. It was fall, and I was enjoying the reds and yellows of the leaves all around me. When I turned my head forward to attend to a downhill portion of the path, I looked straight into the liquid eyes of a buck. He was so close I was able to count his points. There were fourteen. Believing that his flight instinct would be strong, I moved slowly towards him, expecting at any moment for him to leap off into the woods. But he didn't. Watching

me, not with fear, but with what I felt was welcoming companionship, the buck let me gently come within six feet of him. His nostrils quivered, taking in my scent. His glossy coat was dappled by the leaf shadows. I had never seen such a beautiful whitetail. Before I sat down on a rock close by, I visually measured our shoulders, appreciating our matching heights. We looked long at each other. Then he simply started grazing on the leaves of a large bush.

As a little girl, I had always loved any story where a wild unicorn came to a maiden in the woods and laid his head trustingly in her lap. Maybe this was my unicorn experience. When the buck finally started to stroll down the trail, I rose and followed, only a few feet behind. He stopped and turned to look at me, his head erect, his enormous rack spanning the path. It seemed he was inviting me to continue with him. I stepped forward, and so did he. After a couple of minutes, he stopped again and looked back at me. We continued on our magical walk for what could have been twenty minutes (although time seemed suspended). Then the buck curved onto a deer trail that was almost as large as our main path. This time, he didn't look back in invitation. I took his cue and didn't pursue him further. The buck disappeared into the forest, leaving me spellbound.

Because he lived in lands that were uninhabited by natural predators and that were protected from hunters, this buck had never startled from a gunshot or run from a mountain lion. Is that why he wasn't threatened by me? Still, I was a stranger to him—unpredictable. At that time of the year, he was in full rut, and he could have chosen to try to intimidate me by stamping his foot and brandishing his horns. Or, faced with the unknown, he could have simply frozen in place, trying to make himself invisible, and as such, less likely to be noticed and potentially hurt.

Instead, the buck, seemingly unafraid and not feeling the need to prove his prowess, chose to accept me. And in this, he offered me grace.

Constructed fear—that self-protective need for control—closes us off to relationships and to new experiences. Openness welcomes both. Several days after my incident with the ducks, a severe summer storm ripped out huge willows from their roots. The vegetation was ravaged all around the lake by my school. I walked, slowly searching the area for my chick and his family. This time, because of my gentle pace—a pace and tone that mirrored that of the buck—the fifty ducks snoozing on the sidewalk hardly ruffled their feathers as I passed them. I found my little family snuggled in the grass next to the bank of the creek that fed the pond. When I approached, the mother leisurely prodded her brood into the water, letting them swim close to the bank where I stood. This was balance. Not of power, but of grace.

I would like to believe that I am learning to face most of my constructed fears well. Yet, shadows from the past—times when I felt intimidated or abused—can sometimes still leave me shaking, questioning who I am and where my talents lie.

Most recently, I doubted my ability to write this essay. In preparation, I had been reading Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—a masterful work that weaves narrative on nature with deep thought. I began to compare my writing to hers. Fear rose in me. The flight instinct screamed at me to run away—to do anything but try to write this impossible essay. Conversely, the fight instinct boasted to me that Dillard's work was subpar and that I could do just as well. So what if she had won a Pulitzer Prize for hers? Even more crippling, though, were the residual voices of my past—those voices that still

sometimes freeze my confidence because they predict I will never be an effective teacher; will never be a serious musician; will never be a strong writer.

Was it residual fear from that first surprise bear encounter that made me, several weeks later, mistake a huge, shaggy dog on a trail for another bear? I felt silly grabbing for my pepper spray while the dog skirted sheepishly around me and the owner grinned both in apology and amusement. After that, I was so determined not to show my fear again—even to myself—that over the next few miles of that hike, I deliberately ignored any dark movement in the trees. Then a shape in the middle of the path changed (from what I had convinced myself was a stationary stump) into a large, mobile black bear. He and I stopped at the same moment and looked cautiously at each other. The irony of it all took hold of me. I laughed out loud. At that sound, the bear wheeled into the woods. And I smiled the rest of the way back to the car.

Real bravery is not meeting a bear in the forest and feeling no fear. Perhaps, instead, it's choosing to face constructed fears rather than hiding behind false pretenses or attempting to prove superiority. I doubt that I can ever fully conquer all the constructed and residual fears in my life. But maybe real bravery is also the ability to acknowledge truth. I can write. However, it will be different from others'. My creative process is part of who I am, and in this, I am being true to myself. Had I turned away from writing this essay, I would have missed the passion of the process. As it is, I found joy in the work itself and, through that, have already tasted satisfaction.

Still, bravery alone doesn't seem to be enough. Is grace the real antithesis of fear? If I can't look past myself to recognize the worth of others, I will be unable to learn from them, or even to enjoy what they might have to

share. Annie Dillard, through her vulnerability in her writing, offers her readers grace. Her openness says we are valuable; we are people who can be trusted. In the same way, if I extend grace to those I encounter, this openness leaves room for us to take pleasure in each other's talents while developing our own. Then, we are better able to experience all that is good.

For obvious reasons, I did not extend grace to the predator in Paris. And it's sad that my principal and I could not grant each other mutual respect when we had the opportunity. If we had, I'm sure we could have learned much from one another. Yet, the forgiving ducks at the pond, the buck in the forest, Annie Dillard in her writing—these and more, through their openness, through their grace—have all shown that there is another way. A way that releases the need to control life rather than freezing in it or fleeing from it or fighting through it.

For a third time that season, a bear and I encountered each other. In the mottled light of late afternoon, we stared, not in fear, but in straightforward curiosity. I felt almost a kinship with him—similar to what I have experienced with the friendly hikers I have passed on my treks. After our silent greeting, the bear turned and lumbered back up his trail. I stood a moment longer under the leaves, just now beginning to change their colors. Soon, I too turned and continued on my way. A way that chooses grace. A way that opens to life. A way that leads to joy.

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