

## “On the Edge of Vulnerability”

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### Readings

Psalm 139: 1-4, 6, 13-14, 23

from *Psalms Anew* by Nancy Schreck and Maureen Leach

Yahweh, you search me and know me. You know if I am standing or sitting. You perceive my thoughts from far away. Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is even on my tongue, Yahweh, you know it completely. Such knowledge is beyond my understanding, too high beyond my reach. You created my inmost being and knit me together in my mother’s womb. For all these mysteries – for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works – I thank you. God, search me and know my heart; probe me and know my thoughts.

Return

from *Circle of Grace* by Jan Richardson

Remember. You were built for this, the ancient path inscribed upon your bones, the persistent pattern echoing in your heartbeat.

Let this be the season you turn your face toward the One who calls to you: Return, return.

Let this be the day you open wide your arms to the wind that knows how to bear you home.

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Let’s begin this morning with a definition of the word “vulnerability”: *a quality or state of being exposed to possibilities of being attacked or harmed either physically or emotionally.* If you think deeply about it, we all faced vulnerabilities being born, growing up, and surviving to whatever age we are now. In fact, without spending time listing the possibilities, it’s safe to say we all live at the edge of vulnerability every day – especially the big one; our death could come at any moment. This morning I want to focus on what helps us overcome our fears, what helps us face our vulnerabilities, and as Dr. Linda Clever described it a couple of weeks ago, “play out the hand we were dealt.” And doing that, my friends, means being in and participating in the game of life.

Recently, and for the first time, I have begun to envision God the all-expansive creator, the Holy Spirit, the Presence that pervades our being as completely as the air we breathe. Think about it: in the womb we don’t breathe, but we get our oxygen through our umbilical connection to our mother’s breath-filled blood. She is our first link, and through her we are filled with Divine Air. At birth, our lungs expand and fill with air, the cord is cut, and we are on our own, but now with a direct link to the Divine Air we breathe till death. In his book *Awakening*, author Mark Nepo talks about this umbilical link, referring to our belly buttons as the “spots” that could remind us daily of our connection to God.

Let's stop and take a look at ancient history for a minute. From our faith resource, the Bible, we know that the Hebrew names for God in 300 BC were the Holy Spirit they called *Ruach*, which means breath, and *Yahweh*, the word too sacred to be spoken. It is thought the word is taken from the sounds of breathing. Take a few seconds and take in a deep breath with your mouth open. *Yah* is the sound of the inhale, *weh* of the exhale. This notion of breath and air comes up many times, such as in Exodus 3:14. From out of the burning bush, Moses was told "I am that I am." *I am* is from a Hebrew verb *Hayah*, meaning to become or sustain, and is associated with life. Psalm 34:1 says to breathe is the very essence of life. In Genesis 2:7 we read that Yahweh breathed life into the lungs of humanity.

There are several more things to say about this link to the Divine Air we all need. In the introduction to her book *The Spiritual Child*, Dr. Lisa Miller, a clinical psychologist and researcher begins,

Science is a lens, a way of understanding just about anything, including, as it turns out, Spirituality. Science is particularly powerful in deciphering things difficult to perceive with the naked eye, which has made it all the more valuable as we search for tangible evidence to explain our relationship with an essentially intangible realm.

Through scientific study using MRIs, genetic research, and epidemiology, Dr. Miller has determined that we are born with a natural spirituality, fundamental to mental health and wellness, especially as it develops in the first twenty years of our lives. She makes a good case for there being a Divine link connecting us to God whether we can acknowledge it or not. I believe this is an important spiritual understanding. How does knowing that we are linked to God help us overcome our fears?

Theologian Henri Nouwen says it this way:

Throughout the gospels we hear *do not be afraid, fear is not of God. I am the God of LOVE*. The invitation is to move out of the house of fear into the house of love, to move away from that place of imprisonment, into a place of freedom. Make your home in me, as I have made my home in you.

One of Nouwen's prayers is:

Dear God, Speak gently in my silence. When the loud outer noises of my surroundings and the loud inner noises of my fears keep pulling me away from you, help me to trust that you are still there even when I am unable to hear you. Give me ears to listen to your small, soft voice saying: "come to me, you who are overburdened, and I will give you rest... for I am gentle and humble of heart." Let that loving voice be my guide.

Having had two extremely difficult pregnancies and deliveries, and being a three-time cancer survivor, I have had to find ways to deal with my fear of death. What I learned several times over is that in order to face your fears, you have to acknowledge and then inhabit them. The danger is that once you let them in, they can paralyze you, take over your every thought, keep you in a constant state of dying. You no longer are on the edge of vulnerability; you are consumed by it. I remember well the day I got my first cancer diagnosis. I had been on my way to buy a birthday present for one of the grandchildren, and stopped by my doctor's office to get the results of the tests I had just had. I have absolutely no memory of leaving that office, but I know I spent significant time in a toy store,

wandering up and down the aisles, not knowing what I was looking for. Fear had entered and brought my brain to a halt. I was fortunate in that I have my faith. I believe in a Creator God, the lessons of Jesus, the power of love and compassion and empathy, and I drew on those links. I listened for the ideas, paid attention to the hunches, explored the possibilities to find ways to move me away from the fears, to experience life fully again, even if on new paths. The fears didn't go away, but they didn't overcome me. I am not one who can call these experiences gifts, but they did open up new doors and windows I hadn't known existed in me before.

One example of a new door opening up for me is my decision to create the clown character CAN-DO here at CCC when several of us participated in a "Clowngregation" twenty years ago. Do you remember Betty Bubbles, Pat McKeown's Leprechaun, John Belz with his giant hat, Beth Scwebel as flying-pigtailed Lollie, Amaeya as the Good Fairy, Sammy Burke and the Sunday school kids (Christopher Luther, the Kontinen triplets and their brother, along with the Weichels) as we planted an imaginary garden to the song "Inch By Inch"? Through a dream addressing my fears of losing my hair, and through the long process that was laid out for surgery followed by chemo and radiation therapies, the idea of going into the hospital as the clown CAN-DO was hatched. It wasn't easy; the idea wasn't always positively received. In fact, I'm sure many thought I had lost my mind. But creating CAN-DO worked miracles for me and opened up many meaningful conversations. I am forever grateful to my beloved Bill for accompanying me every time I stepped into my clown character as if it were a totally normal event. I also remember that you as a congregation sent me jokes and stickers I could hand out to others. I think I still have some of them. My faith, my husband, my faith community and my friends all helped me go beyond my fears and get through those rough times.

Yesterday at our fourth Saturday Lenten series time together, eighteen of us explored the theme of "Dancing in the Darkness," and pondered the question *How do we deal with fear and get ourselves beyond it?* It became clear to many that walking the labyrinth, meditating, praying, being with and talking to friends, breathing deeply, reading comforting books or poems, journaling, writing, painting, listening to music, and going for walks were some of the methods we use to connect us to our hearts, and to God's calming love. We gather our hope and trust best when we're not consumed by fear. We were also able to acknowledge the importance of being part of a faith community where people share their compassion, love, empathy and hope with one another, going through difficult times as trusted companions. Part of our call to action, as reflected in the words of our church covenant, is

to live out the questions together hand in hand, supporting the fragile, protecting the wounded, giving the angered space and time, dancing with the freed, celebrating moments of balance and not fearing the unfolding of imbalance. Believing in the power of God's revelation, we share a living awareness that faith and hope and love are the inhaling and the exhaling of life...as necessary and real as the air we breathe.

In closing, I want to use one of the Celtic blessings from Beth Richardson's book *Christ Beside Me, Christ Within Me*.

## **Some Days Are Very Hard**

Some days are very hard.  
And on those days  
May you know that you are loved,  
You are held,  
You are not alone.

Some days are very hard.  
And on those days  
May you remember that  
Hope and healing surround you.

And if you cannot remember,  
If you cannot trust,  
If you cannot feel the Presence,  
Let us remember and trust  
And feel and believe  
On your behalf.

Some days are very hard.  
And on those days  
May light and love  
Soothe your heart  
Calm your mind,  
Heal your spirit,  
Surround you in peace.

Amen