

*(Jesus' encounter with the man with the unclean spirit was thought to be a new teaching. He addressed the man's fear rather than have him removed from the synagogue. "Committing to the fall line" in the sport of snow skiing is a way to talk about moving through the kind of fear that limits freedom and ability to live fully.)*

A new teaching – what a curious thing to say?

Was it how Jesus responded to intimidation?

How would we have described this man who approached or accosted Jesus?

I probably would not have said something like, "I see you have an unclean spirit."

I would probably have described him as rude, aggressive, and confrontational.

We might have thought him frightening.

Actually, he was the one who was frightened.

And Jesus draws this so-called unclean spirit from him.

He does it quickly.

Jesus cuts through the issues and reaches to the heart of the matter.

Let's assume it was all the pent up emotions  
that caused the convulsions.



I want to consider this today from the standpoint of  
the fears within us – and how those fears – can take us captive -  
alter our behaviors and limit us in many ways.

They can keep us from building relationships.

They can keep us from some fields in which we might want to work.

They can prevent us from trying out things –  
whether it is recreation or travel or social - you name it.

Sometimes our fears protect us - but sometimes they really slow us down.

A British publisher once asked several lay people to write sermons.

The sermons were to be published under the title, "If I Could Preach Only Once."

Among those invited was the late Gilbert Chesterton,  
an English journalist and author. "If I had only one sermon to preach,"  
wrote Chesterton, "it would be a sermon against fear."<sup>1</sup>

This is a sermon against fear.

I believe Jesus dealt with someone's fear that day  
and helped him be free in a way he had not known before.



The story says Jesus was different than other teachers.  
He did not motion for someone to haul the man out of the synagogue  
and then talk about why –  
look up references to how this might have been dealt with before.  
He worked directly with the man – with what was going on with him.  
Was that the new teaching?

He didn't go back to the scrolls – like the scribes always did.  
He did not teach as they did.  
He did not avoid what was going on in the present by going back to  
what had been written in the past.  
What is recorded of the past is important – certainly it is.  
But it was not what was needed at this time and place -  
and for this person.

This was a time to deal with someone's fear  
and other emotions – feelings –  
that were present and real for him right there in the synagogue.

Fear is a powerful emotion – it can paralyze.  
When mixed with hate - is often at the heart of the terrorist.  
I want to address fear today with a few illustrations -  
one personal – then with a couple of parables – one whimsical and one quite serious.

We don't know what really happened that day and  
the condition of the man Mark wrote about.  
All fears are not equal – and some are valuable.  
I don't want to imply that the illustrations represent fear in the same way.

But we only have our experience. And when we deal with these stories  
we only relate to them through what has happened in our lives.  
We connect our experience to their experience.  
That is the way they can come alive to us.



I am calling this message “Committing to the Fall Line”  
because of a fear of my own.

What is a *fall line*?

A fall line is the most natural and direct way down a mountain.

It is the way water would run.

I am at best an intermediate skier -  
beginning to learn how to ski bumps and steeper terrain.

My instructors tell me to look down the mountain and  
carve around the bumps –  
lean slightly into the turn.

Pay attention to the fall line.

Going down the mountain is what I want to do – it's why I am there.

But I am frightened. I'm intimidated.

I don't want to trust the mountain – and myself -  
and the engineers who designed my parabolic skies  
and Surefoot boots – and gravity itself.

But I must - unless I want to be a captive of my own terror -  
collapse into the snow with eyes full of tears -

yelling at anyone who might suggest otherwise.  
There are moments when I am ready to lash out at anyone in my path.



It is not all that uncommon – not uncommon at all.  
Have you ever been frightened of some kind of new technology?  
And found yourself angry?  
It usually happens the other way. We find ourselves angry -  
and then recognize that we are frightened that we won't be able to learn  
how to use the computer or the software - or whatever.  
I won't even mention VCR's or DVD players and remotes, iPods and Blackberry's.  
It may just be impatience - or fear of the process of learning.  
It can be very powerful.



When I use the image of the *fall line*  
I mean trusting nature – trusting the learning process -  
within my skill and practice level – to carry me -  
as if in the arms of a gentle universe – a gentle God -  
so that I can enjoy the sport – enjoy the mountain – enjoy.



Leslie Weatherhead once told a parable of a little boy who fled from a witch  
who had turned herself into a cat.  
The first time he looked back, the cat was the size of a calf.  
The next time he looked, it had grown to the dimensions of an elephant.  
Then the boy fell – unable to go further.  
He got up and faced the pursuing horror.  
And it stopped.  
He took a step toward it. It backed away.

As he continued to advance toward it –  
it began to shrink in size as it retreated from him.

Finally – it changed into a mouse  
and ran under the door of the witch's cottage  
to be seen no more.

The moral of this is clear – it pays to face up to your fears.

A whimsical illustration – to make a point.

We all have our demons. And there are different ways to cast them out.

But first we need to face them -  
*commit to the fall line* – if you will.



There is an ancient Buddhist parable – in a little book by Satish Kumar  
called *The Buddha and the Terrorist*.

It is a little like this story of Jesus and the unclean spirit -  
but from a Buddhist view.

Thomas Moore – who many of you may know from his book *Care of the Soul* -  
writes a Forward to the story. He writes about the kind of anger

that grows in individuals and groups of people over time.

It's handed down family to family and nation to nation.

Moore says it's like a virus buried deep in all violence that is contagious.

Remember - fear is usually what's underneath.

Violence erupts and others respond with vengeance.

It has been around for eons.

It was there in the time of Jesus – and it is here now.

Humans just keep addressing it the same way.

We just don't seem to learn – how to address it in a better way.

Thomas Moore says -  
the Gospel of Jesus, the Dharma of Buddha, the Tao of Lao Tzu,  
and the Tariqu, or way of love, in Sufism  
all teach that you can let go - of your grip - on this chain of fear – anger - violence.

Let's consider our story about Jesus and the man with the unclean spirit.  
He didn't return the man's accusations – the man's violence – or have him removed.  
Maybe that is why those watching were surprised.



*The Buddha and the Terrorist*

is about an encounter between the Buddha  
and a violent murderer whom everyone feared.  
When they met in the forest that day – although the Buddha had been warned  
and begged not to go into the forest - the Buddha was not afraid.  
What happened was that  
the Buddha engaged the man through his layers of defense  
to all the feelings and emotions that lay beneath his terrible actions.



A new teaching –  
perhaps it was a new teaching to those who observed that day.  
But – it was not new to the spiritual teachers.  
The spiritual teachers know that violence is a result of fear  
and all the emotions that attach to it.



It's why we encounter this thing about fear in whimsical parables  
like the witch who becomes a mouse.  
It's why we encounter it in a story like *The Buddha and the Terrorist*.

And if you think about your own experience -  
you may recognize it - when it's a part of your own life.

Consider when fear is doing something  
or preventing something in your life.

If *committing to the fall line* is a useful image for you – use it.

You may have another that works better for you.

But find one – and let the teacher – with a new teaching –  
who amazed the people in the synagogue that day - be your guide.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from King Duncan