

Chapel Talk  
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February 2006

“Leap”

What do you fear? I asked this question of my students today in class. Here are some of their responses:

I fear that people won't understand me.

I fear being alone.

I fear DISCS.

I fear seeing a mouse in my room.

I fear failing.

I fear I will disappoint someone close to me.

I fear that I will look back on the year and regret all the opportunity I lost because I was not confident enough to speak up.

When I look back at some of the most pivotal experiences in my life, it's clear that they all involved fears like these. In those uncertain moments, everything was in question: Who was I? What was I doing? And, often, where could I run and hide?

Like you, I made that long drive down the St. Andrew's driveway for my first year away from home. I don't remember whether the speed bumps were there then, but it felt like a slow motion entrance to the place I would spend the next three years. As our family station wagon inched forward, the winding driveway seemed to make time crawl to a halt. The world outside our car window was completely unknown and therefore completely unsettling to me. Even though I had chosen to come to St. Andrew's, and actually was quite excited to come here, for a moment, the inside of the car looked like a better and better place to remain. We finally did arrive, and I did get out of the car, and I said a shaky good-bye to my parents. I sat looking around my clammy cinder-block nook on Lower Moss in a state of anxiousness and fear. I felt, literally, frozen to the spot. The

corridor seemed too vast to safely explore, and a walk to Founders would have been unimaginable. I was paralyzed by the swirling doubts and fears in my mind: would I make good friends? Would I be able to be myself? Would I succeed at anything here? I felt like I needed someone to remind me—why did I get myself into this?

Seventeen years later, I found myself asking very similar questions as I drove down the St. Andrew's driveway. Returning to work at St. Andrew's had seemed like an unquestionably perfect decision—not even a decision at all. But still, that long driveway brought up all my fears and doubts. Here I was about to become colleagues with people who I was sure remembered every one of my faults and mistakes. How could I possibly be good enough to teach alongside them? Yes, I was coming back to my beloved school, where I had spent three great years as a student, but by returning was I merely going in circles? My imagination and anxieties churned as I gripped the steering wheel. I felt that same old feeling, fear, causing me to doubt myself, to be completely irrational, and to second-guess a decision that I knew was right.

I suspect that all of us could tell stories like these—moments of fear and uncertainty that seem to magnify our self-doubts, our shaky grasp of who we are. Maybe you are facing some of your own anxieties and fears, whatever they may be. When I was a student, my fears probably sounded something like this: What if Mrs. Roach hates my *Hamlet* paper? How can I take an art class when I haven't drawn anything since seventh grade? Will Callen Hurtt laugh at me if I ask him to semiformal? When I think back on those fearful moments, one of my favorite Shakespearean expressions comes to mind: “queasy, lily-livered waterfly.”

My favorite lily-livered character from literature, J. Alfred Prufrock, deliberates and questions himself enough to make any of us feel bold in comparison. The hero of T.S. Eliot's poem wanders around feeling awkward, cautious, and stymied by his own tentativeness. He wants to engage in conversation, to approach a woman at a party, to say *something*, but he is completely paralyzed. Prufrock shows us how limiting fear can be when he says,

“Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.”

Like Prufrock, I too have failed to take risks, simply because I was afraid. I want *Prufrock* to “dare to eat a peach,” but I’m not always bold enough to do so.

The work of Carl Jung reminds us that fear is an inevitable presence in our lives. He writes, "There are as many nights as days, and the one is just as long as the other in the year's course. Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word 'happy' would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness." Jung also suggests that we have no choice but to “disturb the universe,” to “dare,” to “presume,” if we are ever to move beyond our paralysis and stasis. As Jung explains, “you must enter that which you fear the most.”

One of my favorite moments from literature describes such a feat. Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* retells an African-American folktale about slaves who actually flew home to Africa. Morrison’s main character, Milkman, discovers an ancestor who flies, and he yearns to fly himself. At the very end of the novel, Milkman takes a “leap” -- a moment that embodies both a literal leap off a cliff and a metaphorical leap of faith. With his leap, Milkman risks failure and death. But transcendence, motion, and action are described in Morrison’s final sentence: “If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.” For Milkman, the moment of flight happens only when he surrenders to and even embraces fear.

Perhaps, as *Song of Solomon* beautifully conveys, a little fear is a *good* thing. It can drive us to meet new challenges; it charges our adrenaline when we attempt something extraordinary. As one of my students wrote, “fear makes us work hard.”

Some people actually *crave* fear for that reason—it makes us feel exhilarated, like when we go on death-defying rides at amusement parks or scare ourselves with horror movies. A neuroscientist named Gregory Berns recently published a book that examines what happens in the brain when we try challenging and new experiences. Our brains crave the chemicals that we release when we push ourselves beyond what’s comfortable and safe. Although those experiences may not be pleasant and could be painful, we grow in the process. Berns says, “The people who are most satisfied with what they do are the ones who really lay it on the line and go for it.”

Not surprisingly, the times I have felt the most fear were also the experiences that pushed me to take risks and discover something really worthwhile. Some years ago, my younger brother died in an accident. I felt completely devastated, scared and lost. I came home from my teaching job in California and spent the summer months with my family and close friends. I wanted to sit still and just hoped that the world would sit still with me. I felt content to live in my father’s house, to sleep in my old bedroom that hadn’t changed since eighth grade, to work in the same summer program I had worked in during college. But I had also been given a grant to study in Oxford, England at the end of the summer. A three-week study trip, my spot in a course studying Shakespeare, my 750-year-old room in Merton College, awaited me.

But how could I face a new place on my own, when it felt safest to stay right where I was? What would I say to new people I met? What if I felt alone? What if the plane crashed or I got mugged or something happened to my family while I was gone? I definitely did not want to face a new experience; I did not want to feel uncertain or scared or alone; and, rational or irrational, I feared getting on that plane.

So I went. I studied Shakespeare’s comedies, ironically, at a time when I felt quite tragic. But in many of the plays I read and saw performed, comedy *coexists* with tragedy, and humor dances side by side with serious reflections on life. The comedies, then, were not so unlike real life—because, even in a comedy, fear and uncertainty and darkness were

still present. At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, everything ends up fitting back together: the mortals return to court and the fairies to the forest, the lovers get together with their proper partners, and life returns to normal. But none of this happens without confusion, pain and darkness along the way. And even when the characters regain their balance, memories of the night still linger, like a “dream.”

My trip showed me that Shakespeare's comic vision was in fact true. Sometimes, just as I had feared, I felt lonely. Sometimes I felt grief and fear. Sometimes I wondered why I had ever decided to come. But the trip was most memorable because of the adventures I had and the discoveries I made. In those three weeks I saw outdoor productions and productions in great theaters; I studied in a medieval library; I took a train to the Cotswolds and the beach resort towns of St. Ives and Land's End. At Merton College, I had a great running loop that I did in the mornings before class. This loop took me down crooked, bumpy streets, over canals, through woods, past cow pastures, pubs and shops. On those runs, I felt like myself again. I was all right, and I was even having a pretty good time.

Maybe a moment of transcendence doesn't have to be about doing something as fantastic and unreal as flying—it can also be about the catharsis you find on a good run.

How will you get up your nerve to “eat a peach” -- to start something new? To try? To risk failure? To leap?

You might not always be bold and fearless. You may not always find the guts to, say, stand up with four friends in front of the entire school to sing an Eagles song. But sometimes, and you'll know when, you'll ignore your own quaking, quavering and wavering and instead say, “OK. Here goes--” and in the long run, after the adrenaline has worn off and your heart has stopped pounding, you'll be blessed with some surprising discoveries.