



MORE THAN AMERICANS

Opinions, reflections & rants
2001-2003

*A strange and wonderful
combination of wisdom,
compassion, outrage & humor.*

THOM RUTLEDGE
*Author of **Embracing Fear***

*This is for all of you who have encouraged me to speak out.
Here's to the courage in us all.
Here's to our ever-expanding ripple effects.*

More Than Americans
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DEAR READER,

This is a pdf document --- as opposed to a book. Frankly, this collection of essays, articles and letters has not gone through the painstaking process of professional editing that earns such a document the right to be called a book.

Book or not, it is my first effort to launch some of my political commentary in a collected form into the big wide world. I am grateful that the impetus for this project has been multiple requests from my readers.

This document is also free of charge. I very much appreciate your interest in reading it in part or whole and ask that if you like what you read, that you pass it around to others who might be interested. Again, feel free to share it in part or whole. All I ask is that when sharing this with others that you cite me as the author and whenever possible mention my web site (www.thomrutledge.com) for people who are interested in knowing more about my work. Readers can contact me directly at thomrutledgeauthor@gmail.com

Thank you for your interest and your support of my work. I hope you enjoy *More Than Americans*.



Thom
Rutledge
PSYCHOTHERAPIST | AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

Having written self-help books for the past 15 years, my recent evolution into political commentator has surprised even me. Ever since I witnessed a gathering of war-mongers first hand at the 1971 conference for the Texas Young Republicans¹, I have had a tendency to speak out about social injustice, but never considered myself smart enough to become very involved in political discussions of any kind. I have since learned that this is an experience common to many, many people. And as you will see in the pages that follow, I am letting go of the issue of my questionable intelligence in favor of my own mental and physical health. Over the past 3 years, if I had not been writing political commentary, I would surely have exploded.

My wife, Dede, credits our Supreme Court appointed President, George W. Bush, for my transformation. Dede says that Dubya is my muse. And a powerful muse he is. Besides his being such a boon for my writing career there really may be a more significant upside to the Bush administration's reign. (Can't you just feel yourself wanting to complete that last phrase with "of terror.?"?) The upside may be found in the awakening that is occurring because of the damage the Bushites are inflicting on the United States of America. Many of us had been lulled into a false sense of security about the stability of democracy in the U.S. And now, as we enter into 2004, an election year like no other, those of us who are paying any attention at all know better. Democracy is only as safe as the people make it. No career politicians should be counted on to protect our rights and freedoms without our close supervision. They have forgotten that we the people are their "boss." And we have forgotten this too.

More Than Americans is in a way the documentation of my awakening, and my remembering, over the past three years. My hope is that it can contribute to awakenings and memory restoration of others --- yours and those you share this with.

Thank you --- Thom Rutledge / December 27, 2003

¹ I was in attendance of the Young Republican gathering because I was trying to get a date with Carolyn Clothier, who was a member of the organization. As evidence of my lack of control of my own life, I report to you that I never came close to getting a date with Carolyn, but I did become the president of the Hale County, Texas Chapter of the Young Republicans.

PSYCHOTHERAPY & THE BIGGER PICTURE

I am interested in exploring the principles of individual, family and group psychotherapy to the broader context of our world, socially and politically. As a psychotherapist and author I want to contribute --- and encourage others in my field to contribute --- to what I am thinking of as socially responsible self-help education. This is material that challenges us not only to grow personally, but also to apply our increasing maturity to becoming better citizens of the communities in which we live, from the smallest village to the entire human species.

If self-compassion, arguably the most important goal of psychotherapy, does not lead to increased personal responsibility, I would suggest that we have missed the point.

- Thom Rutledge

ADJUSTING OUR PERSPECTIVE

The clients I saw in my psychotherapy practice during the weeks that followed the horrific events of September 11, 2001, expressed a myriad of responses, including shock, fear, and deep sadness. But we all had one response in common: we saw our day-to-day concerns and problems from a new perspective. What was a big deal one moment was barely a blip on our emotional radar screens the next.

As the shock wore off, and as we all began to deal with the feelings below the shock, many of us experienced a strange guilty feeling. As we settled back into our daily routines, we felt guilty when we began to think that those little blips on the emotional radar screen were big deals again.

“It’s not realistic to expect yourself to no longer have personal problems,” I told Diane, a client who had expressed a great deal of guilt about having any feeling other than compassion for the victims of the terrorist attacks.

“But everything I bring up seems so insignificant now,” she said.

“Does everything FEEL insignificant?” I asked.

Diane thought for a moment and then said, “No, that’s the problem. I am thinking that I shouldn’t be feeling upset about certain things, but I do.”

Part of Diane’s response is good for all of us. It will be great if we can do a better job now of keeping things in perspective, of realizing when something doesn’t need to be a big deal. But paying attention to our dissatisfactions, even our little complaints, can also have a positive effect, especially if we realize that often they

are trying to communicate something deeper than the surface complaint. It's all about listening to ourselves.

That day in Diane's therapy session, I told her something a teacher of mine had once said that has helped me tremendously. Like all significant truths, it is deceptively simple. But this one little tid bit has the power to transform our self-critical nature. The truth is this: dissatisfaction and gratitude co-exist; one is not an indication of the other's absence.

Among all the possibilities that September 11th represents for us, individually and collectively, let us hope that the heightened sense of perspective (knowing what really matters) and gratitude for what we have right here and right now, will remain with us. But let us also be careful to not use that perspective and gratitude as weapons against ourselves. Our strength will be found not in self-condemnation, but in believing in the good in each other and in ourselves.

WAKE UP CALL ... TO WHAT?

December 2001

We can all agree that Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001 was a wake up call, right? The disagreement begins when we ask, “wake up call to what?” Just a few of the varying responses are as follows:

- we are not safe from foreign aggression in our own country
- we have been soft on terrorism in years past
- we have not dealt as responsibly and ethically with foreign relations as we like to think
- the intelligence system that is supposed to protect us has major flaws

Some have even said that we were being visited by God’s wrath because of our culture’s unrepentant sins.

But on that Tuesday, and in the days to follow, those of us living in the United States witnessed unification unlike anything since World War II. We bonded in the face of the trauma of September 11th. Even politicians from different parties agreed with each other.

We have experienced a wake up call from an alarm clock bigger than any of us ever expected. And now, a year after the terrorist attacks, having experienced fear of anthrax and other possibilities so frightening that we don’t even want to think about them (but now we are thinking about them), we are left to go about

our daily lives with our heightened collective awareness of just how uncertain life can be.

I believe that the question of “wake up call to what?” is the most important question to ask, and that the best answers lie beyond national and global politics, in the realm of human nature. It has been said that “adversity makes the man,” and even more wisely, that “adversity reveals the man.” One year ago, adversity struck --- it struck hard --- and who we are, as individuals, as communities, as a nation, and as a species, is being revealed with increasing clarity.

To a large extent, the news is good. The immediate aftermath of the 9-11 attacks evoked amazing demonstrations of compassion and courage. People tuned into the needs of their fellow human beings in profound ways, and the ripple effect of compassion and courage remains clearly present and strong.

But there are still the booby traps of our human condition, the land mines that we have tripped over for thousands of years. Three of those land mines are what I call the most common human errors. They are: polarization, sleepwalking, and the demand for certainty.

Polarization is our tendency to quickly take a position on an issue and defend that position with our minds padlocked shut. Although the unification of this country’s people and politicians in the aftermath of 9-11 represents progress --- and was a refreshing change --- it is important that we not make the mistake of believing that the resolution of polarization will be found in complete agreement. Open debate and conflict for the purpose of creating solutions serves us all. We must be careful to not become so attached to our nation’s sense of unity that we forget that a variety of points of view, when shared respectfully and listened to with open minds, will inevitably contribute to better, longer lasting solutions to any problems we face --- individually, nationally, and globally. To insist on blissful unity as a goal is to inadvertently abandon the principles on which democracy is founded.

Sleepwalking is of course the condition of walking through our daily lives more as robots than as conscious beings, living our lives more by default than by decision. After September 11th we may think that we will never sleep walk again, but we will. It is part of the human condition. Let's accept the challenge to not only do what we can to remain awake ourselves, but also to help each other stay awake. When you see me start to doze off, please give me a nudge, and I will do the same for you. It's responsible friendship.

I have a theory that every psychological defense can be boiled down to an attempt to create the illusion of certainty. Uncertainty is the nature of life, but we hate it, we fear it, and we deny it. Most of us can think of examples from our own lives in which we have opted for a negative certainty over an extended period of uncertainty, even when a positive outcome was possible. A classic example is ending a relationship because you don't believe that you can handle the possibility that the relationship will not work out. You know --- the best defense is a good offense. We just cannot stand not knowing.

When anxiety arises from uncertain times, as we live in now, we are in danger of repeating the most common human errors. When uncertainty looms large, we are tempted to cover our fear by taking a polarized position or trying to hide from our fear by falling back to sleep. In the midst of all that is uncertain, there is one certainty: neither of these will work. They are land mines.

Uncertainty is what we have to deal with. It is what we were dealing with before September 11, 2001, and it is what we are dealing with since September 11, 2001. Let's deal with it wide-awake, respectfully, with compassion and courage, with open minds, together.

Please nudge me when I doze.

PROBLEM SOLVING 101 FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

April 2002

It has come to light that some Catholic priests have been sexually molesting young boys. The same light has expanded to show us that others in the Catholic Church have participated in minimizing the severity of this abuse and in actually covering up the problem. No doubt these are serious problems.

So let's solve some problems.

The first step to effective problem solving is clear and accurate problem definition. In an interview on NBC's Today Show (4/22/02) Bishop Joseph Galante made the statement that the first problem to be solved was the loss of credibility suffered by the Catholic Church. On the surface, his statement makes sense, but look just a little bit closer and we see how short sighted and self-serving the Bishop's problem definition is. It's like saying the loss of a driver's license is the first priority to be addressed after someone is arrested for a hit and run accident.

I want to suggest that there are four primary problems that need to be solved in this situation. Only when these four problems are addressed with focus and a commitment to find thorough and fair solutions, will it be reasonable to move on with confidence that significant change for the better has occurred in response to this horrible circumstance. The four problems are as follows.

- 1. The need to protect children in the present tense.*
- 2. The psychological effects on the children (many now adults) victimized by the priests.*
- 3. The psychological condition of the perpetrators of these crimes.*

4. The need for legal action through the judicial system.

Let's take a look at each of these is a little more detail.

The need to protect children in the present tense.

This problem is implied in the other three identified problems. It is essential that first priority be given to identification and intervention with any priest who is currently having inappropriate, sexually abusive relationships with children. It is easy to become so focused on the specific cases that have come to light that we forget that there are priests currently exploiting children in similar ways.

The argument can be made that no priest who has recently been having sexual relations with children will continue to do so now that all of the media attention has been cast on the issue. While this can be true to some extent, it is important to note that most adults who have been treated for having sexual relationships with children report an experience of loss of control, like that associated with addiction. It is not wise to assume that media attention and fear of being caught is enough to stop the behavior in all cases.

The Catholic Church needs to make the protection of its children the priority, even when doing so will further damage its credibility with its parishioners and the public at large. Jesus said, "blessed be the children." To my knowledge, he said nothing about protecting the credibility of priests.

The psychological effects on the children (many now adults) victimized by the priests.

The next priority is also based in the present tense. The people who have come forth with their stories of exploitation and sexual abuse at the hands of their trusted priests are no longer in danger of being harmed in the physical sense by their perpetrators. But the psychological impact from this kind of abuse is not

something that exists in the distant past --- something to simply “get over” --- but instead is a very real problem in the present.

Without fear of repercussions (or at least without being controlled by those fears), the Catholic Church should make top-notch psychotherapeutic treatment available to all of the victims of this abuse.

The psychological condition of the perpetrators of these crimes.

This is where I may lose the support of some of my readers, but it is a very important element in solving these problems effectively. If what I have said to this point has made sense to you, please hear me out.

The priests who have abused these young people are in need of treatment, not imprisonment. This is not to say that they are not to be held accountable for their behavior; only that the more effective ways of imposing accountability are not predominantly punitive. Remember that our mission is to solve problems, and by definition this means seeking ways to insure that the problems do not persist or recur.

The most effective resolution of inappropriate sexual behavior will be found in the mental health system, not the prison system. I have already demonstrated with this article that I am not particularly pro-Catholic in this matter, and now I want to make it clear that I am also not in favor of the lynch mob mentality that often results in these circumstances. As is often the case, our reflex tendencies are to polarize in the face of such an emotionally charged subject; we abandon rational thought and take a position based only on our initial gut reaction. In other words, we take a position and close ourselves to further discussion. The truth --- in this case, the best means of making meaningful change --- lies in the mid-range, that strange gray area many of us know too little about. I believe this gray area will include not only extensive and effective treatment for perpetrators, but will also involve educating the public-at-large about the very real condition of sexual

addiction, kept in the shadows far too long. Sexual addiction is not just a joke for the sit-com writers; it is as real and as dangerous as any other addiction.

The need for legal action through the judicial system.

Only when an identified perpetrator refuses to step up and accept responsibility for his behavior should we make pursuing criminal charges a priority. This is not to say that crimes have not been committed, but that there are more effective solutions to be found elsewhere. The issue of law suits being brought against individuals and the church-at-large, is something that needs to be assessed on a case by case basis. The only suggestion I have about this is to encourage victims of sexual abuse by priests to make the procurement of their own psychological treatment a priority (on the Catholic Church's dime of course). In the course of that treatment, they can make decisions about whether or not to take legal action.

To state the obvious, all of the preceding represents only my personal opinion. In an effort to practice the open-mindedness and gray-area thinking that I preach (as a psychotherapist and as an author), I want to make clear that I do not profess to be the most fully informed person in this matter, and I will remain open to listening to other opinions that might well influence my own thinking.

My intention here has been to share something of what I do know about, and that is most importantly that problem solving from a rational perspective is necessary if resolution is to be defined as the creation of positive, lasting change, and that sexual addiction is a root cause of the problem the Catholic Church now faces, and must be addressed clinically more than legally.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

August 2002

Dear Editor:

There is a picture of Julia Roberts in a dark suite, white shirt, and conservative eyeglasses in my newspaper today. The caption reads: "Julia Roberts testifies before Congress." Where's John Stossel when you need him? Give me a break!

An article by Bob Dart (Cox News Service) describes how celebrities are lined up to speak to various congressional committees. Dart points out that even Kermit the Frog has testified before Congress. Am I the only one worrying that maybe there some congressman who doesn't know that Kermit is a puppet? Dart's best point is that these celebrities are appearing before Congress in lieu of experts on the subjects at hand.

I can understand using celebrities to gather support for this or that cause in the general public. That's just good, old-fashioned advertising. But I would sure like to think that the men and women we have elected to Congress are more likely to be influenced by quality information than they are by star power.

I'm worried that somewhere in Washington D.C. one congressman is saying to another, "I'm not sure how I am going to vote yet. I'll decide after I have consulted Julia and Kermit."

Thom Rutledge

MAKE COURAGE A DAILY PRACTICE

An essay to commemorate the anniversary of 9-11-01

September 2002

As the first anniversary of the horrifying terrorist attacks of 9-11-01 approaches, I am thinking about courage. It has been said that adversity reveals who a person really is. Last September on that world-changing Tuesday morning, so much courage was revealed.

We usually think of courage in larger-than-life terms. We think of people who have faced insurmountable odds or who have ignored consequences to themselves as they stood up for others. We tend to think of extraordinary people when we think of courage. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela may come to mind. Or if I ask you to think of someone who is courageous, you may think of someone you have known personally --- a parent or grandparent or friend. Following the attacks of September 11th a year ago, we witnessed and honored the courage of not only professional rescue personnel, but of ordinary citizens, who faced with unthinkable circumstances have demonstrated the best of humanity in their thoughtfulness and actions.

The continued threat of terrorist attack has given us all the opportunity to ask ourselves if we would act with such courage given similar circumstances. For instance, how many of us have taken our seats on an airliner during the past year without giving some thought to what we would do in the event of a hijacking? How many of us have not considered the potential devastating effects of bio-terrorism?

I believe that most of us are braver than we were a year ago because we have been practicing. That is, we have been rehearsing our courage mentally. The principle is the same as a fire drill: the more familiar we are with the planned procedure in the event of disaster, the more likely we are to act according to that procedure with minimal thought "in the event of an actual emergency." All of this

of course is good, but I think it is important that we also seize the opportunity to expand this rehearsal of courage into our day-to-day, non-catastrophic lives.

We can ask ourselves the question that my friend Jana Stanfield poses in one of her songs: "What would I do today if I were brave?" We need to apply this question to every aspect of our lives, not just in our preparedness for disaster. How would I act today at my job if I were brave? Would I stand for what I believe is right even if my opinion is unpopular? How would I behave in my relationships with family and friends if I were brave? Would I be willing to rock the boat a little, rather than just taking the path of least resistance? Even, how would I respond to my own inner-critic today if I were brave? Could I go so far as to tell that big bully that lives in my mind to sit down and shut up?

Jana's question plops us right in the middle of the present moment, and drops the responsibility of our choices in that moment squarely into our laps. That's a pretty powerful question --- an excellent way to not only rehearse our courage, but also to make courage a daily practice.

Sometimes courage will just happen, but the predominance of courage in our daily lives will increase with practice. I am willing to bet that the day that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery Alabama bus in 1955 was not the first day that Ms. Parks acted with courage. I seriously doubt that the passengers who foiled the terrorists' plans over Pennsylvania on 9-11 were acting with courage for the first times in their lives. When you consider the courageous people you know, isn't courage a part of their character?

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the horrendous terrorist attacks of 9-11-01, let us renew our commitment to live each day with courage, and with awareness that we are all connected --- as citizens of this nation, and as citizens of the world.

MORE THAN AMERICANS: GOD BLESS US ALL

September 2002

How will September 11, 2001 be remembered in the years to come? As the beginning of the end? As one more day that woke us up for a while ... until we drifted back to sleep? Or could it go down in history as a terrible wound inflicted that awakened us to the need for healing? Maybe we could be like the man who has a heart attack (bad news, right?), but his trip to the emergency room results in the discovery of a cancer that is then successfully treated.

As we approach the first anniversary of the horrific September 11th attacks, may we take the opportunity to expand our minds and hearts beyond the potentially dangerous nationalistic pride. The real tragedy of 9-11 is not that America was attacked but that human beings are both capable of and willing to inflict such pain on other human beings. That's the cancer.

Albert Einstein referred to nationalism as a disease. I'm no Einstein, but I believe that, as is so often the case, the challenge is to put things into a reasonable and realistic perspective. Anyone who genuinely wants to contribute to healing must resist the temptation to approach global politics like it's a team sport or an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. Just as I take some of my identity from being a Texan but do not consider that identity above my being an American, we must also not let our identity as Americans keep us from seeing our place in the bigger picture as members of the human race and guardians of planet earth.

As a psychotherapist and as a participant in my own personal growth, I have come to believe that our hearts and our minds are intended to work together, in partnership, neither one imposing itself on the other. The emotions that have been stirred in us during this past year are important; they are vital. The analysis that has been generated is just as important. Our challenge, as Americans and

as citizens of the world, is to put the two together, to allow our hearts to fuel us and our minds to direct us --- and specifically direct us to break free of old familiar, circular patterns of behavior that ultimately solve nothing. All growth moves from inside out, so to bring about change in the most substantial way possible, we need to begin by tuning into the conversations that are going on within us --- you know, the committee that exists in us all. And if you put your ear to the conference room door and hear nothing, if you are only of one mind, one unanimous opinion about all that is going on in our world, I will be so bold as to suggest that you are hiding behind simplicity and all-or-none thinking.

With courage we can step away from the security blanket of oversimplification and into the less comfortable turbulence within us. Like the horror we felt a year ago, that turbulence is a sane response, congruent with the tumultuous conditions of our human relationships. Like I tell my clients --- and do my best to practice --- we need to listen carefully to the inner-struggle. Don't run, don't hide behind over simplifications and scenarios full of good guys and bad guys. Listen to our hearts and minds; they are hard at work. And we need to pay attention. We need to think a thought or two past our initial reflexes and remind ourselves -- - and each other --- that the community in most danger here is not America, but humanity.

The solutions we so desperately need will not be found in a contest to see who the toughest guy on the block is, but in a partnership that begins within each of us and expands to become a global sense of community. There are no easy answers. We must be willing to face our own cognitive dissonance, be willing to experience the discomfort there, and be willing for that discomfort to move us to pro-activity. Don't just think about volunteering; volunteer. Don't just complain about government; participate. Don't just disagree with this article; write a letter to the editor.

Einstein said many thought-provoking things, among them a statement that I have yet to reconcile as someone who believes in both the right of self-defense

and the superiority of peaceful interventions. He said, "We cannot simultaneously prepare for war and for peace."

So as we approach this very important anniversary in our country's history, let us make the solid decision to open our hearts and minds to dealing with the problems we now face in new and creative ways. By all means, God bless America. But let's not forget to add, "God bless us all."

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

September 2002

Dear Editor:

I am writing to thank you for two op-ed articles in your September 10, 2002 edition: "The Long Haul" by Paul Krugman, and "Real Battles and Empty Metaphors" by Susan Sontag.

The war on terrorism is a metaphor, as both Ms. Sontag and Mr. Krugman point out, and not the best metaphor by a long shot. The reality is that we are not so much at war as we are involved in fighting crime. Consider the approach of law enforcement to solving homicides. The better metaphor is that of police work.

Is it too late to trade metaphors?

Thom Rutledge

THE OTHER SIDE OF FREE SPEECH: THE RESPONSIBILITY TO LISTEN

November 2002

A little more than a year ago, as the shock of the 9-11 terrorist attacks began to wear off, we were mad ---- fighting mad. It made perfect sense; this was a completely sane response to being so viciously attacked. President Bush, joined by uni-partisan support, declared war on terrorism. The nation --- and much of the rest of the world --- joined together in grief and in outrage. Even Paul McCartney sang “we will fight for freedom.” It all seemed so clear.

We feared other attacks. We became afraid of our mailboxes. We realized that even the air we breathe is not guaranteed to be safe. We thought that the world as we have known it was suddenly, drastically and forever changed.

Now, a year later, everything is not so clear. Opinions about the best way to proceed in this war on terrorism vary greatly. The smoke of emotion is clearing, and we are left to consider our circumstances rationally.

First, and most importantly, it is essential to recognize that the broad range of opinions being expressed (although quoting Martha Stewart’s catch phrase may not be as popular as it once was) is a good thing. The freedom to speak our minds without government interference is the foundation on which this nation is built. But just as important, and unfortunately far less emphasized, is the other side of free speech: the freedom to listen to each other. As a psychotherapist and author I have spent the last 20 years helping clients and readers learn to communicate better. To do so successfully entails many elements, but none more important than the three (3) simple principles of 1.) slow down, 2.) take turns, and 3.) listen with curiosity. Healthy communication is productive

communication, and the same principles that make healthy communication possible between a husband and wife, parent and child, or employer and employee, are the same principles that will help us communicate productively in our democratic system and ultimately in the bigger picture of global politics.

I do not claim to be an expert on world affairs, but I am by virtue of training and experience, an expert on communication. From that perspective let's take a look at how each of these three simple principles might be applied to the current circumstances in our nation and in the world.

1.) Slow down.

For years I have been telling couples I have worked with in my therapy practice that these two words constitute the absolutely best, most important communication advice: S-L-O-W D-O-W-N . It seems inherent in our hurry-up culture that we habitually move through conversations like we consume fast food.

My hope is that we can slow our own thinking down enough to recognize the importance of being thorough with all that we have to consider in the very complex circumstances in which we now find ourselves. When something is as emotionally charged as our views on this war on terrorism, we are in danger of rushing into decisions that are based more on those charged emotions than on rational deliberation.

2.) Take turns.

When I am working with a couple in therapy, once I can get them to see the importance of slowing down, the next step is for them to agree to respectfully take turns expressing themselves. Many attempts at communication are doomed not because the parties involved lack the capacity to express themselves or the ability to listen, but because they attempt to address more than one agenda at a time.

As citizens of this nation we could contribute so much more effectively to the problem solving needed if we could loosen our grip on the single mindedness of just wanting everyone to hear what we have to say. Maybe we could do something as radical as asking someone else what they think. We become so desperate to have our point of view heard that we lose touch with a basic sense of fair play, not to mention forgetting that we may not always know everything there is to know.

3.) Listen with curiosity.

When we are desperate to have our point of view heard, even when we appear to be allowing time for someone else to speak, we are not really listening to them. Instead we are “making wise use of our time” constructing our next rebuttal while the other person speaks. I tell my clients that once we can slow down and once we can agree to take turns, the next challenge is the toughest one of all: listening to each other with curiosity.

To listen with curiosity is to put aside judgment of what another person is saying, at least long enough to understand what that person’s point of view is. Listening with curiosity, which also means that we don’t assume that we always know what someone else is going to say, is the best way I know to demonstrate respect for one another.

Our minds slam shut refusing to even consider other viewpoints because we are scared. We hate not knowing and not being sure, so our psychological defense is to convince ourselves that we have some exclusive hold on some ultimate truth. We need to be able to reassure ourselves --- and each other --- that to open our minds and be genuinely curious about how someone else perceives a situation does not mean that we have to abandon our own point of view. As a sign on my office wall reads: “I respect your opinion and I trust my judgment.”

My hope is that as citizens of this great nation we will become so determined to practice these three simple principles of healthy communication that we can become a sort of collective role model for our elected officials who suffer from the same communication deficits that we do.

In the business of psychotherapy, what I am describing is referred to as attending to process rather than content; it is analogous to teaching someone to fish rather than giving them a fish. I tell my clients that when they can learn the principles of effective communication and when they become committed to practicing those principles in all of their relationships, both personal and professional, there is nothing they will not be able to talk about and ultimately no problem that cannot be solved.

I'm not an expert on world affairs, but I am pretty certain that the same applies to our national discourse about the war on terrorism, and ultimately to the dysfunctional relationships between nations throughout this big wide world.

THE THREAT OF “SPECTACULAR” ATTACKS CALLS FOR SPECTACULAR COURAGE

November 2002

TERROR ALERT ISSUED BY F.B.I.

By Elisabeth Bumiller with Jodi Wilgoren

New York Times November 15, 2002

WASHINGTON — White House officials said today that they were taking extra precautions to protect the nation's most critical facilities from terrorist assaults after an F.B.I. warning that Al Qaeda may be planning "spectacular attacks" with mass casualties in the United States ...

The fear that is so pervasive in our nation since 9-11-01, and that has been reinforced with the F.B.I.'s recent warning of the potential of "spectacular attacks," can serve to either paralyze or inspire us, depending on how we choose to respond. And each of us makes that choice on a daily basis. We don't get to choose whether or not fear will play a part in our lives, but we do get to decide --- in fact, we must decide --- whether or not fear will control us.

As a psychotherapist and author I promote the idea of "positive opportunism," the practice of taking advantage of any and all circumstances --- no matter how positive or negative --- to move toward healing. In other words, no matter what happens --- a heart attack, loss of a loved one, a major promotion at work, a windfall inheritance, terrorists crashing planes into buildings, or the persistent dread of impending terrorist attacks --- we can ask ourselves the question, "How can I use this circumstance toward my personal healing and growth?" When we choose this path, based in the belief that success is determined more by what we can learn than by any particular outcome, we are taking an important and powerful stand in the face of fear.

The truth is none of us knows what will happen tomorrow. Will life go on as usual, or will someone space out, run a stop sign, broadside your car and change your life forever? Will we wake up tomorrow only to learn that terrorists have struck again, in some way even more “spectacular” than the total destruction of the World Trade Center? Will there be a new and improved sniper, maybe in the Midwest this time? Will the economy take another nose-dive?

Will the city of Los Angeles still exist at sundown tomorrow? Will you --- or your wife or husband --- live to see that sunset?

Lots of questions. The answer to each of them is the same, and YOU KNOW what that answer is.

“I ----- DON'T ----- KNOW” is the answer.

Here's another good question: is the world in which we live more dangerous now than it was prior to September 11, 2001? Are things more unpredictable than they used to be, or have we just been awakened to the unpredictable nature of life?

I have a good friend who was walking around in perfectly good health (as far as he knew) one morning and by mid-afternoon he was in surgery getting a quadruple by-pass. The interesting thing about this fellow is his attitude. The first thing he said when he woke up in the recovery room post-surgery was “Man, I'm glad we caught that in time.”

I have another friend who doesn't need emergency heart surgery in order to be miserable. He is more likely to walk around in perfectly good health worrying about the possibility that he might have a heart attack someday.

The difference between my two friends is that one has an active inner-voice constantly telling him everything that could possibly go wrong, and my other friend either doesn't have such a voice, or more likely, he doesn't pay much

attention to it. Many of us have this inner-voice, this intimidating bully-within. In the context of current events, we might think of it as an inner-terrorist.

The truth is there is no greater terrorist than the terrorist-within. In fact that is what the terrorists in the big wide world count on: activating the terrorists within us. The fear that we have all been feeling so acutely for the past year is not something we have the power to simply be rid of. Ignoring what is going on in the world will not rescue us from fear, and neither will starting a war. Fear is a natural part of the human experience, and if we stop running from it, hiding from it, or trying to overpower it with machismo, we just might learn something from it.

When we are paying attention, fear is an excellent teacher. Depending on how we listen to the voice of fear, we can either become inspired to live this present moment more fully, or we can be dragged away from the present moment entirely, left to concentrate instead on all that might go wrong tomorrow. And if tomorrow is uneventful, then we can use that valuable time to fret about the next day.

As morbid or negative as this may sound, begin with the knowledge that we are all going to die. Most of us will not choose how we will die, but we all choose --- everyday --- how we will live. Sometimes we make these choices by default rather than decision, but nevertheless the choices are always ours to make. Let fear be a reminder to live your life in congruence with your own personal value system. When you feel fear creeping in, remind yourself that the healthiest fear is the fear of not living a life --- no matter how short or long --- that you can be proud of. Instigate the "Regret-Reduction Program" in your life, living each day in a way that you will not have to regret later.

The essence of what I believe --- and what I hope we can together spread around the world --- is this simple truth: fear is the natural companion of human self-awareness. We cannot refuse delivery; we cannot return to sender. How we choose to respond to fear is the ultimate measure of who we are.

Practice tuning into fear in this way, and even beneath the cloud of potential “spectacular attacks,” you will transform something you used to run from into one of the greatest teachers of your life.

MAKE FEAR YOUR TEACHER

November 2002

What will happen tomorrow? Will your life go on as usual just as you expect, or will someone space out, run a stop sign, broadside your car and change your life forever? Maybe tomorrow is the last day of your life. Hell, maybe today is.

Maybe your doctor has bad news.

Will there be a new and improved sniper? Maybe in the Midwest this time? Maybe in your town? Will terrorists crash another airliner into a building? Will there be biochemical warfare? Will the economy take another nose-dive?

Will you make it home from work tomorrow? Will you ever see your best friend again?

Lots of questions. The answer to each of them is the same, and YOU KNOW what that answer is.

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BULLY FOR US

December 2002

“Healthy fear is the best friend we will ever have and neurotic fear is the arch-villain of our existence.” TR

I have just published a book called *Embracing Fear & Finding the Courage to Live Your Life*. At the risk of blatant self-promotion, I want to suggest that the citizens of the good ole U.S. of A. read it and consider applying the principles described in the book not only to their personal lives, but also to their evaluation of the current state of affairs in our nation and in our world.

For those who will not be inclined to read my book, and for those who will benefit from a little assistance in applying the principles from a self-help book to global politics, I offer this article. What follows are brief descriptions of three principles, each key to dealing effectively with fear, and some suggestions about the application of each of the principles to a national and global perspective.

The first principle in dealing with fear is learning to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy fear. Essentially the difference is this: healthy fear is productive and motivating and unhealthy fear is destructive and paralyzing.

Healthy fear is a wise voice within us that tells us to step out of the path of the oncoming bus and tell us to stay on the paths that are congruent with our chosen value systems. I call this voice “The Ally,” because it is on our side and it helps us remain productive and most importantly, true to ourselves.

Unhealthy fear --- what I call “The Bully” --- holds us back rather than propelling us forward. The Bully within us is that voice that tells us everything that could possibly go wrong and if it ever exhausts the list, it just starts over again. The result is not movement toward the goals of our choice, but stuckness, even paralysis.

George W. Bush has become that voice for our nation. Not the wise and health voice of fear, but the neurotic Bully-voice that seeks to control by instilling and exploiting fear. If the President can say often enough, "Saddam Hussein might be after us; he might be planning to attack us," then people will become frightened enough to react out of that fear. "Hell, yeah," we might say, "let's go get the son of a bitch before he gets us!"

Unfortunately this resembles someone stirring up the passions of a lynch mob more than it does mature, effective leadership.

The second principle of dealing with fear is seeking reassurance. Reassurance is to fear, as food is to hunger. And just like some foods are better for us than others, so are some forms of reassurance. One of the junk foods of reassurance is the implication that if we do the "right thing" then we will all be safe and live securely, happily ever after. This reassurance lacks credibility just as doughnuts lack essential nutrients.

The healthier source of reassurance is found in a willingness to understand the complex nature of the world in which we live. Just as fast food provides immediate gratification for our taste buds, oversimplified (fast) reassurance provides short-term relief from fear, but does not give us what we really need to live long and healthy lives.

Healthy food is not as much fun as junk food. And when we make decisions to evaluate our circumstances --- from the most personal to the global --- with an eye toward healthier reassurance, it is not as immediately satisfying (fun) as when we buy into an oversimplification of the circumstances we face. The gain --- and therefore the pleasure --- is experienced over the long haul. But eating junk food and biting down on oversimplifications that resemble the plot of an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie are not easy habits to break. And to break old patterns of thought and behavior is the key to creating lasting change and long-term health.

This brings us to the third principle of dealing effectively with fear. In order to break old patterns we have to become willing to move beyond our own comfort zone. We need to do difficult things like order the vegetable side dish instead of the french fries. Specifically, the comfort zone we must step out of as we step up to face fear is the safe haven of believing that our lives are intended to be predictable and certain. We are so often not only surprised, but offended, by life's uncertainty, but the truth is uncertainty is the only thing that is 100% predictable.

So to step away from the fast food of reassurance to our fears, we have to become willing to do something quite radical: stand up to the threat that is posed and say "I'm willing to take that risk."

George W, for instance, says to us, "Saddam just might attack us," so that if we do not launch a pre-emptive attack on Iraq and Saddam does instigate some horrific mischief, George and others will say, "I told you so." And as long as we think inside that box with them, we will inevitably come to the same oversimplified conclusion: that because there is a risk of attack from Saddam Hussein, we must strike first.

Move outside the box that defines everything in black and white, all or none terms and we will find a plate of healthy food. We discover that when we factor in a more in-depth analysis of the circumstances along with our own personal value systems, decisions about attacking others because they just might attack us are not as easily made.

The old adage, "adversity makes the man," has been revised by many to read more accurately, "adversity reveals the man." When the going gets tough, we find out who we really are. Unfortunately in difficult times, many people have the experience of abandoning their previously expressed value systems in favor of self-preservation, physically and/or psychologically.

I ask my clients, “How much of what you believe do you really believe?” It’s an excellent question to ask ourselves especially in times of distress. One of the things that awakens my curiosity in this particular time of national and global distress is how many people seem to be reacting to attack and threat of attack in ways that are not congruent with their expressed value systems.

For instance, many people in the public eye these days, including our President, have long claimed to be Christians, followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ. If I am not mistaken, the goal of the Christian life is to live as Christ-like life as is humanly possible, and one of the primary beliefs is that there is life after death. In fact, if you play your cards right, the life after death is supposed to be significantly better than this life.

But instead of any mention of praying for our enemies, or seeking to heal the deep wounds so apparent in what is happening these days, President Bush and other Christians --- some I know personally --- are investing their energy in riling up the lynch mob: “Let’s get ‘em boys!”

The point here is not that we should not defend ourselves, but only that when we are letting fear control us, we will tend to abandon our personal values. It is a human response, a response that must be tempered with good judgment if we want to remain true to those personal values.

Jesus himself told his disciples to “put away your swords.” And Jesus demonstrated that there is more than one way to fight back. We would be hard pressed to find someone who would describe the story of the crucifixion as a story of a wimpy guru who gave up the fight, or as the story of an ineffective leader. Of course, the opposite is true.

What I am about to suggest may seem a little too far outside the box for many, but please just indulge me for one more moment. If we choose to focus on living our individual lives as congruently as possible with our chosen value system; if

we accept that most of us will not choose how we will die, but that we all choose (everyday) how we will live; and if we decide that how we live is more important than how we die; we just might move far enough away from the box to break some very detrimental patterns that have contaminated humanity for a long, long time.

I am not suggesting that any of this is easy, and I am not presenting myself as a model for how to think and behave in this way. What I am doing is trying like hell to get outside the box.

BE SUSPICIOUS, BE VERY SUSPICIOUS

November 2002

A Newsday article by Tom Brune, Knut Royce and Ken Fireman (November 15, 2002) made the front page of The Tennessean, where I live in Nashville, carrying the headline, “Be very afraid.”

Apparently some “senior Bush administration official” actually said, “Our message is be afraid, be very afraid,” a comment right out of a trailer for a new horror movie. Of course we have no idea who said this or if it has any credibility whatsoever because the days when journalists had to check their sources and know what they were talking about are long gone. Also long gone apparently are the days when the Bush administration even attempted to be subtle with their strategy of manipulation by fear of the American people.

Think about it. What purpose is served by instructing the public to be afraid? The message was not “be cautious,” or “make your travel decisions during the holidays with the knowledge that terrorist attacks are still a very real possibility.” No, the message was for us to “be very afraid.” The only purpose this serves is control. As a psychotherapist for the past 20 years I cannot count the number of times I have witnessed relationships in which one person controls another by feeding their fear and sense of helplessness. The Bush administration is to the American people as a violent and controlling husband is to his abused and victimized wife. And just like that demoralized wife needs to make a decision to remove herself from an abusive environment, we need to stand up to George Bush and his Bushites.

For starters let’s just look at this one article by Brune, Royce and Fireman. Here are some of the statements from various “officials” that are supposed to back up the “be very afraid” message:

“There is very good reason to be alert now.”

My question: When is this not a good idea?

“Al-Quaida terrorists may be planning attacks in the U.S. aimed at mass casualties and economic disruption.”

They MAY be? And by the way, aren't most terrorist attacks aimed at mass casualties and economic disruption?

“Al-Quaida may favor spectacular attacks that meet several criteria: high symbolic value, mass casualties, severe damage to the economy, and maximum psychological trauma.”

Has anyone ever suggested that we are in danger of being attacked by terrorists who want to minimize psychological trauma, not harm many people, and leave the economy stronger than they found it?

“Terrorists might pick more vulnerable targets, and rely on ‘truck bombs, commercial or private aircraft, small watercraft, or explosives easily concealed and planted by terrorist operatives.’”

Okay, so now we are zeroing in on the bastards. We're pretty sure that an attack would come by either land, air or sea.

“Nothing has gotten less ominous since [last summer].”

This statement overwhelms me with the amount of non-existent information in it.

The very informative article also contains the following:

“The alert is based on a ‘summary of intelligence,’ and is not a new warning, and ‘no specific method, location or timing for attacks emerged from intelligence reports.’ “

And these instructions to make us very afraid make excellent use of the words “may” and “might.” As in, “lightening MAY strike me during the next thunder storm, and I MIGHT win the lottery.”

The strategy here is fool proof as long as we don’t look and listen from a more critical perspective. The “officials” tell us that a terrorist attack might occur. If one does not occur in the near future, the Bushites step up and take credit for excellent security, and when an attack does occur (of course there will be another terrorist attack), the Bushites step up and say, “See? We told you this was going to happen.”

Bottomline: George W and the Bushites want to rule. To borrow a phrase from childhood, they want to “be the boss of us,” and of anyone else they possibly can. And they plan to accomplish this by scaring the hell out of us on a regular basis.

Can someone please refresh my memory? What is the definition of “terrorist?”

THE UPSIDE of FEAR

December 2002

Fear pervades the daily newspapers and television newscasts. It has been so since 9-11-01. Abruptly awakened to the dangers of terrorism on our home turf, we wonder when the next attack will come, where it will occur, and how we might personally be impacted. We are a nation profoundly affected -- - if not controlled --- by fear.

We don't get to choose whether or not fear will play a part in our lives, but we must decide whether it will paralyze or inspire us. As a nation we are missing a tremendous opportunity for personal, community, and national growth if we only focus on fear as a negative. Believe it or not, there is a positive potential to all this fear; there is an upside.

I have spent more than 20 years as a psychotherapist helping people identify their fears, not so that fear can be banished from existence, but so that it might be used toward healing. How we choose to relate to fear in our lives --- individually and collectively --- ultimately defines who we are.

I teach others --- and continue to learn in my own life --- that fear is not something negative; it is simply a communication, like a "service engine soon" dashboard light that won't go off and is difficult to ignore. The qualitative measure of negative or positive should not be applied to the fear we experience, but instead to how we respond to the fear. When we attempt to run, hide, ignore or cover up the fear, we are indeed taking a negative path. When we recognize fear for the communication that it is, and decide to face and learn from it, we are choosing a positive path characterized by strength and personal growth.

Recently I have been promoting the idea of "positive opportunism," the practice of taking advantage of any and all circumstances --- no matter how positive or negative --- to move toward healing. In other words, no matter what happens --- a

heart attack, loss of a loved one, a major promotion at work, a windfall inheritance, terrorists crashing planes into buildings, or the persistent dread of impending terrorist attacks --- we can ask ourselves the question, "How can I use this circumstance toward my personal healing and growth?" When we choose this path, based in the belief that success is determined more by what we can learn than by any particular outcome, we are taking an important and powerful stand in the face of fear.

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Will the city of Los Angeles still exist at sundown tomorrow? Will you --- or your wife or husband --- live to see that sunset?

Lots of questions. The answer to each of them is the same, and YOU KNOW what that answer is.

"I ----- DON'T ----- KNOW" is the answer. And contrary to popular belief, acknowledging what we don't know is strength, not weakness.

Here's another good question: is the world in which we live more dangerous now than it was prior to September 11, 2001? Are things more unpredictable than they used to be, or have we just been awakened to the unpredictable nature of life?

I have a good friend who was walking around in perfectly good health (as far as he knew) one morning and by mid-afternoon he was in surgery getting a quadruple by-pass. The interesting thing about this fellow is his attitude. The first thing he said when he woke up in the recovery room post-surgery was "Man, I'm glad we caught that in time."

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Practice tuning into fear in this way, and even in the midst of all that is uncertain, you will transform something you used to run from into one of the greatest teachers of your life.

HARPER COLLINS AUTHOR / PSYCHOTHEAPIST EXPRESSES CONCERN ABOUT GEORGE W. BUSH

January 2003

Many Americans are legitimately concerned about the increasingly personal tone of President Bush's rhetoric about his apparently strong desire to go to war with Iraq.

Contrast this President with Franklin Roosevelt. When President Roosevelt spoke to Congress in 1941 of human-kind's right to be free from fear, he defined that freedom as "a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor -- anywhere in the world."

In his efforts to disarm Saddam Hussein, President Bush is not interested in world-wide disarmament, but instead he wants to prove that he is the meanest, toughest hombre on the block, in part because Saddam messed with his daddy. As a citizen of this country, and as an experienced psychotherapist I am deeply concerned about our President's level of maturity --- or lack thereof.

This may be an excellent time for us to revisit George W. Bush's pre-presidential track record, specifically noting that he has consistently needed to be bailed out of the tight spots he gets himself into. He is, in fact, one of the most successful failures I have ever seen. Let's hope that as a nation we can wake up and intervene sooner rather than later --- because as tight spots go, President Dubya may be headed toward one from which he (read as "we") may not be so easily bailed out.

- Thom Rutledge

WITHOUT RESPECT, NOTHING CHANGES

January 2003

A letter to the editor in my local newspaper suggested that we question President Bush's ability to be sufficiently objective in making decisions in regard to Saddam Hussein and Iraq because of his father's past relationship with Hussein, specifically pointing to the senior Bush's life being threatened by Hussein.

I zipped off an e-mail to the editorial writer thanking him for a thought-provoking letter and for his willingness to make the effort to share his thoughts. I know lots of people who intend to write letters to the editor, but never do. Letters to the editor are one very accessible way we have of participating in the respectful dialogue that is essential in a democracy. (The word "respectful" is an important part of that last sentence.)

The writer of the letter thanked me for my e-mail and my support, saying that my response was a welcome change from the many scathing e-mails he had received in response to his letter. He forwarded me some samples of what he had been receiving. Here are some excerpts from just one of those respondents:*

[* I cleaned up this writer's spelling and grammar for the sake of clarity. The word "whit" was "white," for instance and he misspelled the word "idiot."]

- No one thinks you peaceniks are sincere...you're all just Bush-haters...your biased...and bigoted...and don't care a whit about the poor Iraqi's who are oppressed daily by Saddam ...
- had you been alive in 1941, you'd have demanded that we don't respond to Pearl Harbor...and of course...you would have demanded that we " leave Hitler alone...after all what has he done to us? "

- you ought to be ashamed of yourself.....you're a selfish greedy person...
- I wouldn't mind so much if a chemical attack would only kill people like you.....
- this country is done putting our collective heads in the sand like you idiots do ...
- just consider yourself part of Saddam's Army.

I have been a psychotherapist for more than 20 years now and one thing I know for certain is that HOW we communicate is far and away more important than WHAT we communicate. The narrow-mindedness of believing there is only one RIGHT way to think about something is more responsible for the problems in our world than any one opinion or political position.

As long as we live our lives like it is one big competitive game of king of the mountain, those who have the power will continue to change from time to time as a part of the dysfunctional game, but ultimately nothing will be changing. Nothing will really change until enough of us become ready to think --- and ACT --- outside the bounds of what is familiar in order to practice a new communication that is based in respect (which is not the same as agreement) and a shared commitment to find solutions that can work for the greater good of all, and not just for the greater good of whomever is currently king of the mountain.

Healthy and respectful communication is not always easy, but it is where our energy can best be spent.

GOD BLESS THE ASTRONAUTS, BUT - - -

February 2003

My heart sank with the rest of America last week when I heard that the space shuttle Columbia had broken up on reentry. Seven brave people lost. God bless each of them and their families.

Did my heart sink on Saturday morning because there are children all over this country who don't have enough to eat or who are living in horrendously abusive circumstances? Did my heart sink because of the women who died last week due to domestic violence? Did my heart sink for the people who died last week because they either did not have health insurance or because coverage for needed treatment was denied by their managed care organization? Did my heart sink because of the number of people who were shot and killed by handguns this week? Did my heart sink because of the children with mental disabilities who were left to fend for themselves this week in America's public school system? Did my heart sink for the thousands of elderly people who were mistreated or abused physically, financially or emotionally this week?

Did my heart (or yours) sink on Saturday morning for any of these reasons? No, of course not. But why not? These are all at least as tragic as the loss of the space shuttle astronauts. I would even be willing to say "more tragic." The loss of the seven crew members of Columbia is very real, very sad, but these were seven highly intelligent, extremely competent, successful adults who were doing exactly what they wanted to be doing. They were not only following their dreams, they were realizing their dreams. And not one of them would have been shocked if we told them that what they were doing was dangerous --- life threateningly dangerous. These seven brave people knew precisely what they were doing.

Please don't misunderstand. I am not minimizing their deaths. I am not missing the point that the astronauts' deaths were premature, unnecessary, and yes, tragic. My heart goes out to each of them and to their families and friends.

The point I want to make has very little to do with the space shuttle Columbia and its seven brave crew members. The point I want to make is not about them at all. It is about us ---- you and me.

My heart (and yours) sank on Saturday morning because this particular tragedy was televised, because it was delivered past our doorsteps and into our living rooms and bedrooms. Any number of stories would have a similar effect on us if they were delivered as conveniently. In fact, this happens all the time. We don't think much about how unfair our judicial system can be, but when we see a specific story on 20/20 or Dateline about how a particular person was treated unfairly, we respond. We feel the pain, the sadness, and the anger because it is right there in front of us. Unfortunately, we don't tend to generalize from what we have seen. We don't become proactive, thinking that there must be other similar circumstances that require our attention. No time for that; we have to make room for the next real-life drama on 48 Hours.

There is nothing wrong with having a human response to the stories we see on television. The problem is with all that is going on in our world that is not delivered to us for our urgent response. The problem is that we don't become proactive when we learn about injustice. The problem is that technology is making us dumber and lazier, not smarter and more motivated. We are letting the television journalists (read: new breed of celebrity) tell us what to think and even what to feel.

It has become far too easy to not think for ourselves. Thinking can be so complex you know. Almost anything can be ordered up on line and delivered to our doorstep these days, from furniture to drugs to pizza. Why not let our thoughts and feelings be delivered as well. That way we won't have to be troubled by all that other bad stuff that is going on out there. I don't have time to worry about the number of people who are losing their jobs due to the failing economy; I'm busy thinking and feeling about this week's news story, the tragic loss of the

space shuttle Columbia. No two thoughts can occupy the same mind at the same time, you know.

“Are you concerned about child abuse?” you might ask me.

“Why no,” I answer. “Tom Brokaw hasn’t even mentioned it.”

A BIGGER EGO IS ALL IT TAKES

March 2003

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Like George Bush, I am a Texan. Born and raised in West Texas, complete with a fully functional Texan ego installed at the factory. The factory, of course, being Texas.

The Texas ego is the best state ego you can find. Built to last. The Hoosiers of Indiana make a pretty good model, and New York City manufactures a home-city ego that I admit really does come close in quality to the Texas model, but in the end, The Texas ego IS the one to have.

I haven't even lived in Texas for the past 30 years, 25 of which I have lived in Tennessee, but I am a Texan. See what I mean? Built to last.

You may think that we Texans are pretty obnoxious with our top quality, top of the line state-egos. And you would be right of course. That obnoxious quality is part of the package. We like to think --- part of the charm.

Having established that I am a Texan ---- did I mention I'm from Texas? ---- I want to say that while I will root as loud and hard as the next Texan for the Texas University Longhorns when they play their rivals at Oklahoma University, it would never occur to me to launch or support a military attach against Oklahoma. Or any other state for that matter.

This may seem obvious, but stick with me here. As strong and well defined as my identity as a Texan is, my identity as an American citizen supercedes it. Yes, the ego of the good ole U.S. of A. is built stronger and tougher than even my Texas ego.

I want to suggest that there is a legitimate need, given the technological and transportational advances of the past century, for a new, even more improved, ego to be designed. This should not be a surprise to our American egos. After all, we are constantly new-ing and improving everything we make. Buy this soap or that car. It is even NEWER and MORE IMPROVED than the one we told you about last month.

So what about it? I say let's do it. Let's put our minds to it, our shoulders to the wheel, our noses to the grindstone, our butts in gear. In the words of the genius songwriter, Roger Miller, "Knuckle down, buckle down, do it, do it, do it." Let's create a NEW AND IMPROVED, DELUXE, BEYOND THE TOP-OF-THE LINE, MONEY-BACK-GUARANTEED, MAGNIFICENT, EQUISITE, STUPENDOUS, TREMENDOUS, ENVIRONMENTAL-FRIENDLY ----- EGO!

"What the hell are you talking about?" you say. "The last thing this earth needs are bigger egos!"

I'm glad you bring this up. A year or two ago --- or maybe last week --- I would have agreed with you. I would have thought that since big, gigantic, out of control egos seem to be so much a part of the problem that the solution would lie in the other direction. But now I know, or I am coming to accept, that moving toward downsizing egos is about as realistic as total global nuclear disarmament. And I can only beat my head on a brick wall for so long before I start to think, "Maybe this ain't a doorway." (Of course I am proud to say that my head-banging abilities are some of the best --- I'm a Texan after all.)

So let's get to it --- how to build a better ego: We humans apparently are going to continue to insist on defining ourselves in contrast to others, and it is not enough that we be different from one another. We seem to have an inherent need for villains. We must have enemies. We can't be good guys unless there are bad guys. We can't be going to heaven unless someone else is going to hell.

Black/white, yes/no, righteous/evil, either/or. So based on the principle of if you can't beat 'em, improve upon them, we need to find a better --- and bigger --- enemy.

I'm here to get us started. I'm here to tell you that the space shuttle Columbia did not break up because of some unknown technical or structural difficulties. It was shot down by aliens from another galaxy.

Help me spread the word. Let's let the whole world chew on this piece of breaking news and see what happens. My hope is that we can come together as citizens of Earth, with one humongous Earth-Ego, to ready ourselves for the battle we all saw in the movie Independence Day.

And that we will live to see the day when the USA and Iraq meet in a bowl game.

LET'S GET DUBYA SOME HELP!

March 2003

Is he deaf? Is he blind? Is he is stupid? Are the old guys who surround him -- - his daddy's old cronies --- pulling his strings? He certainly shows no signs of open-mindedness. With thousands and thousands of lives at stake, he shows not the slightest hesitation when the other nations of the world as well as an increasing number of U.S. citizens express dissent and even outrage. I think this is supposed to be seen as unwavering courage, but what it looks like to me is stubborn refusal to listen to other points of view and to admit error. Not to mention the total disrespect that he is in office to represent the people of this nation. Maybe he thinks since he wasn't really elected to the office, that representation part doesn't apply. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe it is the rest of us who need to realize that we are now living in a nation with a formerly democratic government that has been cooped by a regime of imperialistic overlords.

As a psychotherapist I have been telling people for years that surprise is denial's last hold out, that it is important to see things as they are and not continue to be surprised and outraged at what has in reality become predictable.

"Can you believe he said that to me?" a woman stuck in an abusive marriage might say to me after describing the latest in a long line of completely consistent abuses.

"Yes," I say to her, "I absolutely believe it. I would have trouble believing it if you reported that he was not being disrespectful and abusive to you."

The question, of course, comes down to what will she do about it.

Our national circumstance is no different. We can continue to listen to the television news with our jaws dropping, occasionally screaming at our television sets (admit it, you have, haven't you?) or we can step up, move past our denial, even beyond our surprise and regain our say in how this country is run.

Is it just me, or has anyone else noticed that our almost-elected President wants war more than he wants anything else?

It apparently has not occurred to George W and the boys that there may be good reasons the rest of the world is opposing them. As the saying goes ---

If one person calls you a horse's ass, ignore him. If two people call you a horse's ass, you might want to turn around and take a look. If three people call you a horse's ass ----- buy a saddle.

Dubya was asked something about a time line for the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq. He leaned forward in his chair, offered one of what I can only assume he thinks is a tough guy look and said, "I'm sick 'n tarred of games and deceptions; that's what I think of time lines."

I got the feeling that we were getting a taste of something that Dubya's daughters may have had to endure through the years, and probably something that George the First may have said to young Dubya on a few occasions: "Junior, I am sick and tired on your games and deceptions."

I knew that something other than Dubya's really being "sick 'n tarred of games and deceptions" had to be behind his response. After all, his entire career (if you want to call it that) is based on games and deceptions. Games and deceptions have been really, really good to George W. Bush.

His response was not surprising. I've stopped being surprised by his ridiculous approach to being President of the United States. As a psychotherapist I am always reminding my clients that surprise is denial's last hold out. I am no longer in denial about Dubya.

I'm not surprised, but it does still seem odd to me that we now have a President who is devoting most of his presidential energy to starting a war. We're not talking about a brave leader is willing to go to war if war becomes inevitable. No, we've got a President who is hell-bent on going to war. This guy is the proverbial dog with a bone, and so far there is no getting him to let go of what apparently to him is a very tasty bone.

But what could be so tasty about a bone that will cause so much destruction and death? What could possibly be so attractive to this dry drunk baby boomer about becoming the man who starts World War III? Is it about money, about oil, about power? Probably some of all of the above, but I think there is something else here that we are not considering. Something that we need to consider.

Several years ago I wrote an article suggesting that instead of a revelation that a candidate has had some psychological treatment being the predictable end of that candidate's political career, that we make psychological evaluation and psychotherapy requirements for our public servants. I have been a psychotherapist for over 20 years and can say without hesitation that the mentally healthiest people I have known have been people who have been wise enough and courageous enough to seek professional guidance. The people who scare me are the ones who know absolutely nothing about psychotherapy, except what they have seen in Woody Allen movies, and who pass the judgment that seeking help is a sign of weakness. These people know even less about their own psyches.

Now I want to revive the idea of this therapy requirement for public officials, and suggest that we get started right away. No time like the present, right? And who better to begin with than the President. Let's get this guy started in some regular sessions ASAP so that he can be encouraged to take a look at himself for a change rather than constantly pointing his finger at people and nations he calls evil.

Let's help Dubya come to terms with some things that he has been avoiding ---- things like his alcoholism, and his understandable (from a psychological perspective) desire to show his daddy what he can do. Specifically, Dubya may even discover that the reason he wants to go to war with Iraq so badly is not because Sadaam tried to kill his daddy, but because his daddy was not able to kill Sadaam. If Dubya can kill Sadaam he can finally do something that his daddy could not do, thereby finally proving himself to be a real man.

Maybe Dubya can talk about the strong impression that John Wayne movies have had on his life, and maybe he can make some headway toward distinguishing between real life and fiction.

Maybe we can help Dubya. I have to hope that we can because if his therapist ever told us that he was not mentally and emotionally fit to hold the office of President of the United States, we would be left with Dick Cheney. And some people are just not amenable to treatment.

WITHOUT A SHARED GOAL ...

March 2003

As a psychotherapist and self-help scribe I have been teaching people for over 20 years this simple truth:

Without a shared goal any attempt at communication is doomed.

In the current global standoff about whether or not to back a pre-emptive military strike against Iraq, is peace a shared goal? Is that what all the players in this real-life version of the game of Risk want? Or giving the benefit of the doubt, is peace what all the players other than Saddam Hussein want? To answer that question is a no-win proposition. If the answer is no --- which seems quite obvious to me --- then we have no shared goal, and all attempts at communication are, and will continue to be, doomed. If the answer is yes, if everyone --- including the Bush administration --- involved does genuinely want to give peace a chance, then we have to face the unfortunate truth that all the peace-seeking minds in the world joined together are not smart enough to solve the serious problem we call Saddam Hussein. In other words, we are either lying about the goal or we are seriously incompetent. (Yes, I know that there is an argument to made that both are true.)

No psychotherapist I know of would argue that violence is an acceptable alternative in the process of solving problems in relationships. Short of direct self-defense, the preservation of one's safety when faced with immediate threat to physical safety, violence is not considered a reasonable option on the menu of problem solving techniques. If we hear the story of a woman who poisons her husband after years of prolonged abuse, we are likely to have compassion for that woman, but we don't go so far as to say that she made the best choice --- or even that the option to poison her husband should be considered a viable one in a civilized world.

No psychotherapist I know of argues that threats of violent attack or any other kind of bullying are acceptable alternatives in the process of solving problems in relationships. No expert in communication that I know of would recommend anything like that. "If your employee is not listening to your instructions, first threaten to smack him around," instructs the organizational consultant, "and then if he persist in his stubbornness, take him out back and beat the hell out of him." This falls in the category of things we are not likely to hear.

The question I have been asking over and over again during these past months, on the brink of a potential third World War, is "What makes us think that an entirely different set of rules for effective communication exists for governments and leaders of the nations of this world?" How could that possibly make sense --- especially when you consider that the rules of communication apparently being used in these extremely important interactions are diametrically opposed to the rules that we are taught to apply in our personal relationships?

I have been writing commentaries like this one for some time now and have become quite accustomed to receiving extreme negative responses to what I have to say. Much of what I receive is nothing short of enraged hate mail, specifically directed at my preference for peaceful resolutions to the many serious crises the world currently faces. In response to some of the articles I have written and speeches I have given recently, I have been called "chicken-sh-", "spineless peacenik," "commie," and "one of Saddam's army," among other things.

This aggressively competitive attitude that exists within our own country demonstrates how far we have drifted from reasonable, respectful, intelligent problem solving. One of the first things I will tell a couple who have come to me for marital therapy is that we are going to make room for both of their perspectives, no matter how conflicting and mutually exclusive they may seem to

be. Otherwise, they will continue to spin their wheels in the same place until getting out of the ditch will be beyond hope.

When we don't make room for more than one perspective in a conversation, it isn't a conversation. Instead it becomes an immature schoolyard stand off, with neither party willing to swallow their pride in the name of resolving the problem. I heard someone ask once, "Would you rather be right or be happy?" I think we can adapt that question and put it to our leadership: "Would you rather be right [and there is a pun there] or have peace?"

I want to make clear to the authors of the hate-mail that I do not believe that answers to the difficult questions we face in the name of world security and peace are easy to find. I do not claim to have a simple answer to any of this. I am not advocating that we turn our back on what is happening in Iraq, but neither do I believe that those who are so eager for a military strike against Iraq have the answer. Which leads us to another principle I have been teaching (and learning) in my 20 years as a psychotherapist:

*If we cannot admit that we don't have the answer,
we will never go looking for one.*

My hope and my prayer as a psychotherapist, as a citizen of the United States of America, and most importantly, as a citizen of planet earth, is that we will individually and collectively decide that it is not too late to learn something about effective communication, and that we might begin by having some real conversations about what our shared goal might be. It's not an exaggeration to say that the fate of our world may depend on it.

CHRISTIANS WANT TO RUMBLE

March 2003

I'm confused. Something seems exactly backwards to me. Maybe you can help. Let me tell you what confuses me.

So many Christians, including George W. Bush, seem very eager to go to war. In response to some of the articles I have written and speeches I have given recently, I have been called "chicken-shit," "spineless peacenik," "commie," and "one of Saddam's army," among other things. I have made it a point to discover whenever possible the religious affiliation professed by the authors of these insults. Guess what? They all say they are Christian.

That's what seems backwards to me. Doesn't it make more sense that people like me --- who admit to having no idea what happens when we die --- would be more inclined to support a pre-emptive attack on a nation that might shorten my life span than people who express complete confidence in a rewarding life after death? But not so. These Christians really want to rumble. I even had one woman tell me that I was misreading the scriptures if I thought Jesus was a pacifist. Say what?!

Even the Pope has made clear his view that a preemptive attack on Iraq would be both legally and morally wrong, but George W and so many other Christians are apparently not bothered by this. I wonder if they send the Pope e-mails calling him a "chicken shit?"

How does this work? How do the followers of Jesus Christ --- Catholic or Protestant --- reconcile their professed religious beliefs with the position that a preemptive attack is justifiable?

I am having a difficult time finding references in the New Testament to Jesus' teaching about justified violence. I assume that President Bush believes that if

Jesus were to return today, he would immediately join him in the Oval office to finalize plans for the bombing of Iraq in the event that Saddam Hussein does not stop being deceptive. I assume that President Bush believes that Jesus is losing patience too, and that the two of them would agree that the best way to deal with Saddam Hussein is to launch an unprecedented preemptive attack on his poverty-stricken country.

But let's imagine George W is having second thoughts.

"Jesus," George says, "I am concerned about the collateral damage that will result if we launch a military attack against Iraq. I've read --- well actually somebody told me --- that 50% of the citizens of Iraq are children. If we launch an attack on Baghdad we are going to be killing innocent children."

Jesus has made himself at home, sitting in George's chair, his sandaled feet on the big presidential desk. He looks at George for what seems like a very long time.

"My son," Jesus finally addresses George, "in times like these you have to look at the big picture. I'm not saying it's an easy decision, but sometimes sacrifices have to be made. Take it from me; I know what I am talking about on that score."

"But Jesus," George begins.

Holding his hand up to block what George is about to say. "But nothing," Jesus says. "We have to do what we have to do. And in this case, what we have to do is blast Baghdad to kingdom come."

Isn't it interesting how strongly we cling to our spiritual beliefs until something really important comes along? I believe, I believe, I believe, I really believe --- but if my life or my livelihood is threatened, all bets are off. What would Jesus do? He'd smite the bastards before they smited us, right? Preemptive smiting.

I don't think so. I think Christians may be finding some loop holes here that I am not aware of.

For the sake of American Christians who support a preemptive strike on Iraq, it is a good thing Jesus isn't here. For one thing, I'll bet he would not be an American (blasphemy all by itself), and for another, he would be one obnoxious "peacenik." You know, all that turn the other cheek and put thy sword away stuff. What a wimp.

"Wake up and smell the coffee, Jesus," we might have to say to him. "This is the real world!"

On the off chance that Jesus would return as an American, what if he ran for President in 2004? Who would you editorial-letter-writers vote for? Jesus or Dubya? Tell the truth.

"No offense, Jesus," we might have to say to him, "but we need a leader who is willing to kill people, and you ---- well, you just don't qualify."

Maybe Jesus could become the White House Chaplain and help us pray that WE win and that THEY lose. Naw, he'd never go for that.

Bottom line: this is just not a good time for Jesus to drop in. We're way too busy.

"Come back later, Jesus," we might have to say to him, "after we have made the world safe for peace."

SUPER W & THE EVIL DOERS

March 2003

When George W. Bush first took office (literally) I read an article explaining how he prefers --- and works at --- being portrayed like a sports celebrity rather than a politician. It made sense to me at the time, but that was before we really had a chance to see this guy at work.

Now I see that our not quite elected president wants to be portrayed as a superhero --- as in Marvel Comics, as in "this looks like a job for Super W!" Envision a big W made of duct tape on his chest and maybe some plastic sheeting as a cape flapping in the bio-hazardous wind.

And what does any self-respecting superhero need more than anything? Yep, you guessed it: an arch-villain. On September 11, 2001 the perfect arch-villain arrived: Osama Bin Laden, evildoer. Better still, this was the supreme leader of the evildoers, role model and big-cheese to the Axis of Evil. After all, any self-respecting arch-villain must have henchmen. But as it turned out, Osama's qualifications for chief arch-villain quickly faded. Or more accurately, Osama himself faded --- completely out of sight. It was even possible that he was dead. That would never do. A superhero cannot be pitted against a villain who won't do his part by saying and doing dastardly things.

At the risk of turning cliché catch-phrases around, this looked like a job for Saddam. Yes, Saddam Hussein would be perfect for the part. What could be better than bringing back the much despised arch-villain from the original Bush presidency? Sequels are often more successful than their predecessors, and the re-introduction of Saddam as "ultimate evildoer" might just be the ticket.

But wait, there is another problem, maybe even two problems. First, everyone else in the world (including the United Nations) does not seem to perceive the big W on Mr. Bush's bulging chest, as he stands tall with that plastic cape flapping in the wind. Could it be that they don't recognize a superhero --- the very savior of civilization as we know it --- when they see him? Could it be that there are more evildoers than we first thought? Maybe Saddam has used a powerful secret weapon of mass hypnosis to take control of the minds of the United Nations Security Council. Maybe the secret weapon was tested on France. The situation seems increasingly dire.

And there is another problem: our arch villain has not been threatening to attack the United States. There is no imminent threat to us from Saddam Hussein. Never mind that; Super W is already pumped up and ready to blast him (and everyone else who happens to be in the vicinity) to kingdom come. Nothing can stop our hero from saving us now ---- even if we don't need saving --- even if our being saved could get us all killed. The important thing is that the world recognize our former AWOL national guardsman, former C-student, former cheerleader, former mediocre businessman, dry drunk, delusional, born again Christian president for the Marvel Comics super hero that he intends to be.

Hey, Dubya can't help it if they just don't make arch-villains like they used to. Sure, he longs for the days of bad guys like the Ayatolla Khomeni, or even better, Adolf Hitler, the evildoer hall-of-famer. Now there was one hell of an arch-enemy. Fortunately, a couple of Super W's special powers are to make broad generalizations and to oversimplify very complex matters. It's as if he was born to simplify. With these powers, Super W can just tell us that what he is really doing is similar to traveling back in time to kill Adolph Hitler. Yeah, that's the ticket. And since we cannot travel back in time to kill Hitler, and since Osama bin Laden is so slippery, the next best thing is to destroy Baghdad in an internationally televised episode of Super W and the Evildoers.

So far, so good. No one has objected to Dubya wearing those spandex tights and cape around the oval office, and although it has been suggested that the current global circumstances be handled with intelligence, careful consideration, and even wisdom, our hero is able to use another of his super powers --- totally ignoring rational thought --- to block these expectations from his awareness, and put his divinely inspired violent plan into action.

Now all there is left to do is for Super W to fulfill his destiny, the destiny conferred upon him by a violent Christian God and Marvel Comics, the destiny he has been salivating over ever since he learned to make those comic book, tough guy faces for the camera, the destiny that begins with the killing of thousands of people while he jumps around on the White House furniture pretending he can fly.

DUBYA'S GIFT
or
The perfect man to drive the train wreck

March 2003

My friend, Billy Bird, offered an uncharacteristically favorable comment about George W. Bush. He said, "Dubya is the perfect engineer to drive the train wreck."

I tend to agree. Maybe Dubya really is --- as he likes to think --- following his destiny in some way. And maybe that destiny really is to help save us all. Maybe he will save us, not from the Bush family arch enemy, Saddam Hussein, not from any axis of evil, and not from wimpy should-be allies who seem to think war should remain an action of last resort, but maybe he will help save us from ourselves. Maybe Dubya is here for one specific and very important reason: to drive the train wreck.

The potential upside of this global mess George W and his cohorts have gotten us into can be found in the possibility of awakening. In my experience, insight does not bring about awakening, pain does. And train wrecks can be mighty painful.

Consider motivation from a psychological perspective. Whether an organism is one human being, a family, a business, a nation, or an entire world, pain is what inspires change. And if Dubya has given us nothing else, he has certainly given us pain.

Pain will either drive an organism to work harder to hide from the truth --- ignoring and dulling the pain --- or toward awakening, characterized by a willingness to experience pain for the purpose of learning how to solve problems in the most effective way possible. In either scenario --- moving toward or hiding from the real problem --- pain is the primary ingredient in motivation.

Insight alone, without the experience of pain, will not provide sufficient motivation for change, at least not sufficient motivation for the degree of change that is needed now, in the midst of one of the great political train wrecks of modern time. Like the alcoholic who has reached the bottom, being smart will not save us. In fact, it is my contention that we humans have a bad habit of using our intelligence to avoid learning the lessons of our history, individually and collectively.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I tell my clients that insights are the tools we use to fine-tune our change, but only after pain has inspired the initial transformation. In the context of Dubya's war, the pain we must become willing to feel is extreme because it is the pain not just of the past three years, but of a human history that persists in believing that the violence of war is a viable option for civilized societies. (What better example of an oxymoron is there than "civilized war?")

Dubya's gift to us is ironically to be found in his apparent lack of knowledge and/or respect of history. Again, like the untreated alcoholic, attempts to make changes to avoid recurring consequences will bring about only temporarily positive results. Until the bigger problem is addressed directly, be it a belief that alcohol works or a belief that war works, the vicious (yes, vicious) cycle continues. As I began recovery from alcoholism many years ago, I remember a counselor explaining to me that bringing flowers home to make peace with my wife was every bit as much a symptom of alcoholism as throwing the toaster across the room the night before. It is no accomplishment to get to the other side of the cycle. What we have to do is break the cycle completely.

Dubya's gift is perhaps to be found in his ignorance. Because he seems so incapable of understanding the bigger picture, because he thinks he is already seeing the bigger picture, the results of his words and actions are as blatant as a stumbling drunk telling us that he is okay to drive. Dubya's gift is in his lack of

subtlety. Since he apparently models himself straight from the old westerns that he and I both grew up watching, there is really no question about the overly simplified model in which he has appointed himself sheriff of the world. What is left to do is for us --- this organism we call the United States of America --- to hit bottom. And Sheriff Bush is the perfect guy to take us there.

Get on board. Let's get this train wreck over with, and hopefully get on with our lives in a world in which we can at least begin to comprehend that violence begets violence and stupidity begets stupidity.

Let us pray for --- and work for --- awakening. Like the alcoholic who has reached the bottom, let us transform our pain into enlightenment.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

May 2003

Dear Editor:

Thank you for Iris Chang's commentary (Fear of SARS, Fear of Strangers / NY Times 5-21-03). As a psychotherapist and author focusing specifically on how people face and respond to fear, I have been concerned to see the lines between appropriate caution and discrimination blurred in regard to Arabs and Arab-Americans since 9-11-01. Now with SARS, we can do the same thing with Asians or with Canadians. Fear of SARS has the potential to increase the size and the speed of the snowball-rolling-down-hill that fear has a tendency to become.

It is worth noting that we do not live in paranoid fear of many other things that statistically pose significantly greater threats to much greater numbers of us. The truth is what we fear will be controlled by others if we do not think for ourselves. In the midst of increasing fear, we must maintain our courage by remaining committed to reason.

Thom Rutledge

LESSONS FROM THE DARK

August 2003

It is 2003. When the lights go out, we immediately think “terrorism.” Our hearts move instantly to our throats as we wait to hear who did this, as we wait to see what comes next. We pray that the darkness and the heat of summer without air conditioning, or loss of water, is all there is to contend with. We wait for CNN or FOX or NBC or ABC or CBS to tell us whether or not to leave our hearts lodged there in our throats. The people in the midst of the power outage, of course, have less information than I do in the first minutes after the power is lost. I am safe, in my office in Nashville.

We cannot know how we will act in the midst of such unpredictable circumstances until we are there. We can, however, be better prepared by mentally rehearsing courage in the face of fear. I believe that many people --- especially in New York City --- have been doing this psychological rehearsing since 9-11-01. And I believe on Thursday, August 14, 2003, we witnessed the admirable results of their collective rehearsal. The people of New York City, along with people from all across the northeast, including Detroit, Cleveland and Toronto, demonstrated how to face adversity with courage and kindness.

These people were given a pop-test on how they deal with fear and they passed with flying colors. Those of us who were not directly affected by the blackout need to be reminded that we should be studying for our own pop-tests. Who knows when it might be coming?

The people of these cities and the surrounding areas are role models reminding us that it is not what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens, that really matters. I have made a career of helping others to successfully face and overcome fear's control in their lives, and I know that fear is a natural part of our human condition. I know that we can --- and do --- waste a lot of energy trying to

be rid of fear, when what we really need to be focusing on is what kind of people want to be in the face of fear. It has been said that “adversity makes the man,” but it is more accurate to say that adversity reveals the man --- or woman.

Who do you want to be in the face of all that is uncertain? How do you want to respond when your pop test is given? These are important questions for us all. These are important lessons for us all. Now go to your study groups and get to work. Courage and kindness don't just happen; we have to practice.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

August 2003

Dear Editor:

Your 8-26-03 editorial on the death of John Geoghan --- and the system-wide problem of prison violence that this high profile incident points to --- concludes with a very logical point: "If elected officials insist on sending so many people to prison, they must be willing to pay the bill for maintaining minimum safe and decent standards while the inmates are behind bars."

I agree with that statement as surely as I agree that $2 + 2$ is 4, but to solve such serious problems in our nation, we cannot afford to end our analysis there. Ultimately the responsibility falls on our shoulders --- yours and mine --- for being a lazy, uninformed, sound-bite-satisfied electorate. Out of sight, out of mind is the unspoken rule of the day. If an issue doesn't blatantly affect us, we don't give it a thought beyond a friendly discussion at the water cooler.

Thom Rutledge

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO WITH A SLAB OF GRANITE?

August 2003

Here's a interesting story: a big ruckus ensues when the order comes down to remove the granite monument inscribed with the Ten Commandments from the Alabama State Courthouse. The Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, Justice Roy Moore, steps into the spotlight to protect the monument. He wants to leave it right where it stands. In fact, before a crowd of his enthusiastic Christian supporters, Justice Moore says "To do my duty, I must obey God!" That was a real crowd pleaser.

Apparently if you read between the lines, the commandments say, "Thou shalt not remove that monument from the Alabama State Courthouse."

What is it with Justice Moore and the Christians who gathered in Montgomery this past week to protect a big block of granite inscribed with the Ten Commandments? Buddhism warns us to not mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself. And Christians warn us to avoid idolatry, which I think is pretty much the same thing: mistaking a symbol for what it symbolizes. It seems to me that these people are gathering in Montgomery so that they can collectively miss the point. Party for Jesus in Alabama!

I have nothing against protest. I'm quite fond of it as a matter of fact. So I am not questioning their right to speak out, individually and as a group. After all, by writing this article I am doing the very same thing. I am just haunted by the nagging, recurring thought that I --- a non-Christian --- may be a better Christian than many Christians.

I certainly believe in the teachings of Jesus and although I am far from a theologian, I have done considerable reading about the man, and about how the New Testament of the Christian Bible came to be. All of this leaves me thinking

about hypocrisy. There will be plenty of exceptions to the generalization I am about to make, but I fear that it is likely to be true about many, if not most, of the people who gathered in Montgomery to protect the granite slab. Here it is: I think they are mistaking the symbol for what it symbolizes, mistaking the pointing finger for the moon itself.

It became popular some years ago to ask the question "What would Jesus do?" I know some people who still have their WWJD bracelets. I think it is a good question, and I like to use it in situations like these --- or even more dire circumstances. For instance, I wrote an article ("Christians Who Want to Rumble") just before the United States blew the hell out of Iraq trying to imagine a Jesus sitting with President Bush in the Oval Office, supporting the argument for a war that would mean the deaths of thousands of innocent lives. Never could get my head around that one. I kept thinking that a bumper sticker that read "Christians for War" might be a big seller.

In the case of the big granite rock in Alabama, I have a tough time imagining that Jesus would spend much time or energy on the issue at all. I think he would be off ministering to the sick, feeding the hungry, or clothing the poor.

I imagine a reporter approaching Jesus in some ghetto somewhere, asking, "Jesus, do you think about Justice Roy Moore and the Christians gathering in Montgomery, Alabama to protest the removal of the Ten Commandments?"

Jesus furrows his brow just a bit, scratches his 3-day old scruff of a beard and says, "I'm sorry, but I haven't heard anything about it."

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

August 2003

Re: Gays in Church and State

By Dirk Johnson and Margaret Nelson

Newsweek, August 18, 2003

Dear Editor:

Some social studies teacher in the future is explaining to her class that all the ruckus about Bishop Gene Robinson is an excellent example of how gay people were once thought to be dangerously different, just as African-Americans were once thought to be inferior. Some kid at the back of the room is not paying much attention because the idea seems so ridiculous.

Thom Rutledge

INCURIOS GEORGE

September 2003

A New York Times editorial (“The Presidential Bubble” 9-25-03) describes George W. Bush as “one of the most incurious men ever to occupy the White House.” Well said. Genuine curiosity is the clearest demonstration of respect for others, but this man has little of either of these characteristics. Incurious George is blatantly without respect for anyone other than those who are just like him.

The Times editorial contrasts President Bush’s preferred persona as a man of the people with the truth of his almost total insulation from the people. The editorial sites the regular practice prior to Presidential public appearances of Secret Service personnel ushering critics of the president into “protest zones” that are sometimes as much as a half-mile from where President Bush is appearing. This guy is no “man of the people,” that is for sure. Hell, I even take issue with the use of the term “public appearance” when it comes to this president. It seems more likely that he is very carefully placed in front of selected groups of adoring fans for photo ops and his tough guy speeches.

I don’t really think that Incurious George is much different from other spoiled rich babies that many of us have known, but the problem here is that this oblivious s.o.b. has the power to ruin millions of lives, and has to date been responsible for killing thousands. (That is, killing thousands of innocent people.) To their credit, most of the Richie Rich’s we have known are not killers.

But I know that Incurious George doesn’t think of himself as a killer. And part of that problem is the result of his insulation from the rest of the country (and world). The Times editorial also quotes Incurious George as saying that when it comes to newspapers, “I glance at the headlines” but “rarely read the stories.” This admission demonstrates that we are dealing more with dangerous ignorance

than we are with stupidity: he clearly does not understand the implications of his telling us that he doesn't read newspapers. (I'm betting that he does read the funnies.)

Ultimately it is not Incurious George's fault I suppose. He was born into insulation, has grown up in insulation --- having been carried by the wealth and reputation of others the entire way --- and apparently lives happily in insulation, smirking, sneering, tough-guy-talking, and laughing at his own jokes.

Whether or not it is Incurious George's fault, it is our responsibility as citizens of this country to put a stop to the powerfully destructive ripple effect this president is sending out every day of his administration. I am grateful to the New York Times for the editorial that inspired this particular rant of mine, and I want my own ripple effect to include a reminder to all American citizens to look closely in the direction of Incurious George when the stark light of objective reality is shining on him.

As we say in Texas, where both Incurious George and I are from, this emperor is buck nekked.

WHAT I HAVE TO SAY ...
*about George W. Bush, blood-thirsty Christians,
 homophobes & people who don't use their blinkers*

November 2003

Okay, that's it. I've had it. I have finally gotten old and tired enough to not worry so much about what everyone else in the whole damn world is going to think of me, so I can just begin to say exactly what I think without apologizing and without fretting over whether or not you are going to still like me once I say whatever it is that I have to say.

First, George W. Bush is an odd combination of ridiculous and dangerous. He's sort of an evil idiot savant. He also is the perfect poster boy for hypocrisy. Just this morning I heard Georgie say on the television that the best way to protect our homeland is to hunt our enemies down one by one and stop them, which I suppose means to kill them. The idiot part comes in when I realize that he really believes what he is saying. This guy really believes that he is here to wipe out evil. The savant part --- the genius --- is found in how he gets so many otherwise intelligent people to cheer him on. Now, to the hypocrisy part. President Georgie is a born again Christian, as are the vast majority of his adoring followers. Do they think that Jesus was just kidding around, or maybe having an off day, when he gave the sermon on the mount ---- and when he said turn the other cheek, and when he said put away your sword? Do these people actually believe that if Jesus himself were here on earth, he would be suggesting that we hunt our enemies down one by one? Really – think about it:

And Jesus said to the disciples, "Whenever you feel threatened, hunt thine enemies down one by one and destroy them."

And Peter was confused, asking, "Lord, pardon me, but aren't you contradicting much of what you have been teaching us?"

Jesus looked upon Peter with a smirk and said, "You are either with me or against me. What will it be?"

Peter was silent, realizing that the teachings of the Christ were flying right over his head.

The preceding passage is from the Lost Gospel of Rummy, recently unearthed in Iraq by someone working for Halliburton on behalf of the Bush administration. Lucky find, huh?

It's not just Georgie and his daddy's friends that get on my nerves. Even more baffling to me are their loyal fans --- fan being short for fanatic you know. These people don't seem to have one independent thought within a thousand mile radius of any of their brains. They are as impressionable as silly putty. The fact that they have been lied to, just like the rest of us, doesn't phase them. And I'm not just talking about the Richie Rich's who benefit from our nation's blossoming plutocracy; I'm talking about middle class folks who are being royally screwed by the objects of their affection. (Well, I guess that works on one level.)

I'm losing patience with this insanity. Consider the uproar in the Episcopal Church over the newly installed Bishop Gene Robinson. These people actually believe that God is a judgmental homophobic prick. How hard is it to look at this discrimination against gays and figure out that in another 10 to 15 years, the anti-gay position will look pretty much like the racially bigoted position prevalent before the civil rights movement. Learning from the past is definitely not a strong suit here.

Consider another passage from another lost gospel somewhere:

And the homophobes chanted, "If the Bishop's gay, we won't stay, if the Bishop's gay, we won't stay!"

And Jesus said, "Okay. Don't let the screen door hit you on the way out."

Truly, that would be a courageous and innovative response to those threatening to break away from the church because the Bishop is gay. It's like someone handing you the end of a rope for a tug-of-war and you just drop the rope --- and you drop the rope every time someone puts it in your hand. My wife asked a good question during the evening news: "Why do they want to put up resistance to anyone leaving the church?" When we don't invest energy in power struggle (inside our heads or out) we have so much more energy to spend on the things that really matter.

Sure, I know I am contradicting myself: waxing philosophic about the strongest resistance being no resistance at all immediately after ranting about our evil idiot savant president. But remember, I am tired and aging and no longer concerned with what you think of me. I am, by definition, temporarily insane. I don't have to make sense. Hell, Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly or Ann Coulter never worry about making sense, why should I?

So this article marks the beginning of a new era for me. I am crowding 50 and have apparently experienced some kind of a tolerance breakdown. If my tolerance doesn't mend itself, you will be hearing more from me on my new favorite subject, "What I have to say," without apology, without disclaimer, and apparently without much diplomacy.

People who don't use their blinkers piss me off too.

THE NATURE OF GULLIBILITY
or
Saddam in hand is worth quite a lot to Bush.

December 2003

Once again we are bearing witness to the masterful hypnotic powers of the neo-con machine we call the Bush administration. Saddam Hussein is captured and we are supposed to respond in a certain way. You know the “right” way to respond. I know the “right” way to respond. We all know the “right” way to respond. It’s the patriotic way.

We are to celebrate. We are to feel victorious. And most importantly, we are to recognize that George W. Bush has been right about the war on Iraq all along. And just for good measure, why not toss in a heightened “terror warning”: ORANGE! ORANGE! That will help keep the public distracted, as well as the very easily distracted broadcast media --- aka: brainwashing machine.

At the very least, those of us who have not proven to be very good subjects for this administration’s hypnotic powers or who are not so easily distracted, are to keep our mouths shut ---- at least for a little while, or else run the risk of being called Saddam supporters or terrorist lovers, or one of my favorites: people who “have forgotten about 9-11.” The people hurling the insults have never bothered to learn the first thing about 9-11 --- from who was and who was not responsible for the attacks (hint: not Iraq), to the opportunistic responses from the White House, to the serious lack of support actually given the victims of 9-11, including police men and women, firefighters and other emergency personnel. Not only have I not forgotten what happened on 9-11-01, I am now a much more informed and pro-active citizen of this country because of it.

But if I have a contradictory opinion to that of the Bush administration, then the terrorists win, right? God forbid that any of us have opinions different from the

party line. Maybe it works like this: if you really love democracy, then let it go. And if it was really meant to be yours, it will return. I DON'T THINK SO!

And what about those of us who have the audacity to actually express those opinions? We are supposed to either see Dubya and the boys as the heroes they fancy themselves --- and market themselves --- to be, or we are pathetic, terrorist-loving cowards (I am forever working on how expressing an unpopular dissenting point of view is cowardly.) and we should leave the country immediately.

When Georgie spoke to the world following the 9-11-01 attacks, saying, "You are either with us or against us," how could we have known that he was also laying down policy for his administration's relationship with the American people? And who could have guessed that such a large percentage of the American public would prove so gullible. Along these lines, I suggested a new book idea to my literary agent the other day: "Gullible's Travels: the day to day life of a typical American."

And if one more person suggests to me that I am "probably disappointed" to hear of Saddam Hussein's capture, I think I will stuff them into a little hole in the ground --- a hole *without* \$750,000.

Where were these people years ago when I was working as a professional magician? They are so easily distracted from what is really going on --- so easily fooled --- that they would have made the perfect audience for my mediocre sleight-of-hand skills.

The real trick of this administration is it's amazing ability to induce amnesia (hypnosis I tell you) so that even in the face of video taped documentation, much of the American public does not remember what was said last year, last month, last week, or even yesterday. George W. Bush plays the part of "big brother,"

here to protect us all --- Americans and Iraqis alike. And presto --- people forget what was said previously, and enthusiastically await instructions on what to think next.

For the record, I am not disappointed that Saddam Hussein has been found. Arresting him --- like arresting any murderous criminal --- is a good thing. But to allow Hussein's capture to represent amnesty to the Bush administration for all of the horrendous, deceptive, self-serving and murderous things it has done would be simple-minded and dangerous. That would be missing so many points that I lose count. I hope and pray that the American public will prove smarter than that.

Let's try this: when I count to three I will snap my fingers and you will awaken --- alert, refreshed, and curious to know the truth. Genuinely curious about the real truth. One, two ...

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

December 2003

Dear Editor:

Once again we are witnessing how the media is in the Bush administration's back pocket. The message is spread far and wide: be afraid, be very afraid. Orange alert, orange alert, Will Robinson! And you small town Americans: you better watch out; the terrorists are coming for you too.

And don't stop being afraid after the holidays. We must remain vigilant at all times. What does that mean exactly? Well, according to Donald Rumsfeld, it means we should go about our business as usual. Just as long as we remain afraid. Oh yes, in saying all this, the Bush administration is seeking to "convey a sense of calm reassurance." (Terror alert may stay raised for months / 12-24-03)

Does the word "propaganda" mean anything to journalists these days? Does anyone want to look into the historical use of fear as a powerful agent of population control?

And don't bother sending the usual hate mail in response to this letter. I already know that I am an unpatriotic, God-less, Saddam-loving SOB.

Have a happy and fear-filled new year!

Thom Rutledge

Author's Note

I conclude this collection of opinions, reflections and rants with a couple of pieces that I wrote somewhere in the time-span of 2001-2003, but these are not connected to any particular event in time. These are what a friend of mine assures me "just worth reading."

May we all continue to seek everyday what is right in front of us, but so very difficult to grasp: the freedom from fear that exists only in the present moment.

TR

12/30/03

DECLARE INDEPENDENCE FROM FEAR

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face ... You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” As much --- and as often --- as I have hoped that was not true, I believe it is.

The belief that we can think and act in such a way that fear will be banished from our lives is a dangerous fairy tale, a fiction that contaminates personal responsibility and leads to reckless reactivity or paralysis. As long as we cling to the need to send our fears into exile, as long as we insist that the goal is to be fear-free, as long we believe that there is such a thing as complete reassurance, we are in trouble.

This may sound negative, even fatalistic --- certainly not a spiritual perspective. Not so. Consider that fear is nothing more than a natural --- even healthy --- aspect of our human condition. When the bear is at the front door, fear wisely and instantly advises that we go out the back door. This is true whether the bear is a bear or whether it is a toxic relationship at home or work. Fear in its most natural form is our ally. It warns us of danger and even suggests remedies for avoiding the danger, if we will just slow down long enough to ask.

And focusing on fear does not necessarily beget more fear. Sure, that can happen (does happen) when we fail to heed Franklin Roosevelt’s famous pearl of wisdom, that fear of fear is the real problem. The challenge is in consciously approaching our fear with an understanding that it is a part of who we are, not some demon to be exorcised. Fear does not have power over us, it does not take our power away. We give it away. It is like an inner-codependent relationship: the harder we try to get the other fellow (in this case, fear) to change, instead of focusing attention on how we choose to respond, the deeper we dig ourselves in. Quite simply, the answer lies in the serenity prayer, which I believe contains the most useful wise words ever uttered:

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Someone once diagnosed mankind's problem as "the reverse application of the serenity prayer," meaning that too often we invest most of our energy in trying to change all that is outside of our sphere of influence and ignore some of the simple, but quite powerful, things we could do to positively contribute to our own ripple effect in the world.

If there is a trick to changing how we relate to fear, it is in recognizing that we are not our fears, but rather we are in relationship with them. When we can imagine our fears speaking to us, instead of "being us," a whole new world of response options opens up.

Life cannot be lived --- at least not lived fully --- without experiencing fear. Fear is not an obstacle standing between you and the life you want to live; it is an integral part of that life. Fear is to be faced, not avoided. Attempting to side step fear is like skipping class: you can do it if that's what you choose, but you will not be making it to the next grade level. (unless, of course, you are a star athlete)

Stop ducking your fears. Make a list of them instead. Start the list today and keep it handy. Add to the list as you become aware of more fears. There is no shame in having fear. It is as much a human characteristic as having skin or breathing air. Don't waste your time debating whether or not your fear "should" exist, or whether or not "it makes sense." These are just stall tactics and will only contribute to the paralysis.

Fear is a teacher, not the enemy. Go back to your list of fears from time to time, select a fear on the list and ask yourself, "What can I learn from this fear?" And

let yourself --- encourage yourself --- to become curious about how you might be different after you have learned that lesson.

Expect the next fear --- aka: challenge --- to follow with another lesson. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can bar the door. Fear is already on this side of the door with you. Put an end to your internal bigotry against fear. Accept your fears as a natural part of the community of thoughts you call "I."

Let fear bring you into closer alignment with what you value most. Don't let fear strip you of, or make you violate what you believe in.

Greet your fears rather than hide from them. Interview them rather than ignoring them. Converse with your fears, listen to your fears, and challenge your fears. Don't automatically accept what they say. Disagree with your fears, and don't always let them have the last word.

Declare your independence from fear. Understand that independence does not mean the absence of fear. It means that you become capable of living in peace with your fears. When you no longer have the need to hide from, get rid of, or ignore your fears, you will be living a life that is instructed, but not controlled, by fear.

Have fear, acknowledge fear, listen to fear, learn from fear, and never let fear do your thinking for you.

Always remember that it is *how* we live, not *that* we live that matters most.

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY: DON'T FORGET TO EMBRACE EACH OTHER

The following is a small matter, but one worth speaking about. As a psychotherapist I am constantly working with people to help them see that big change comes from small changes. Supporting each other in every way possible is one way that each of us can contribute to the multiple ripple effects that ultimately make waves --- as in "rock the boat."

Please make a habit of sending brief thank you e-mails to the authors when you read letters-to-the-editor that you appreciate, agree with, respect, etc. Dissent is often voiced more frequently and with more energy than support and it is important that we not let even small opportunities to support each other pass.

Not all letter writers include e-mail addresses along with their names, but when they do, and when they have expressed an opinion that is anywhere left of center, I know for a fact that they receive quite a bit of negative --- even hateful and personally attacking --- e-mail from those who don't agree.

Every time I have sent one of these thank you's, the author of the editorial has informed me that my positive, supportive response is very much the minority opinion among those who have taken time to respond.

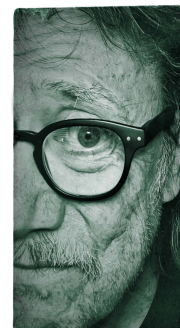
I have also received my share of hate mail in response to letters and commentaries I have written, so I know from personal experience how toxic a mailbox full of insults and accusations can feel. We can't stop the negative responses, but we do have the power to drastically alter the ratio of positive to negative. So please when you read a letter-to-the-editor (newspaper, magazine, in print, or online) that you appreciate, pause long enough to send off a quick thank you. It will help, I promise.

Oh, and by the way, thanks.

TR

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author in Nashville, Tennessee. He has been featured on NBC's Today Show, CNN's Anderson Cooper 360 and Australia's Channel 10. Thom has also consulted with the Dr. Phi Show.

Thom's political writing has been published in The Indianapolis Star, The Tennessean, Counter Punch, The Chicago Tribune and the Philadelphia Inquirer. To learn more about Thom's books, speaking availability and clinical practice visit <http://www.thomrutledge.com>.



THE AYE'S HAVE IT

Republican? No.
Democrat? No.
American Citizen? Yes.
World Citizen? Yes.
Voter? Yes.

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*Does
“political sanity”
have to be
an oxymoron?*

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**Learn from
the past . . .
then get the hell
out of there!**

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**Don't start
WAR**
just because 
you don't feel at
PEACE 

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Embracing Fear is an innovative new book by Thom Rutledge, with a foreword by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, author of *The Invitation*.

Face the fear

Fear is like a big bully that knows your best hiding places. Avoiding it or pretending it doesn't exist will only postpone the inevitable. You must face the bully.

Explore the fear

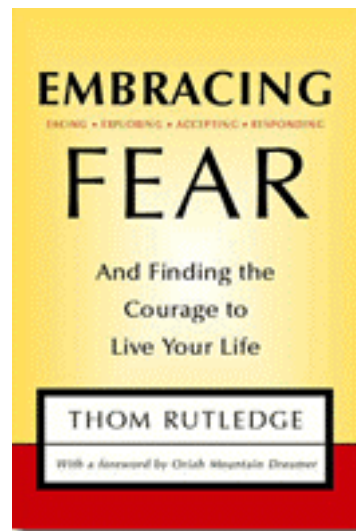
To overcome fear's control, you must move directly toward it, and listen to what it is telling you. Only then can you learn to distinguish healthy from neurotic fear.

Accept the fear

Acceptance is not the same as agreement. You don't have to like it, but before you can successfully disagree with -- and disobey -- the big bully, you must get past the notion that you can be completely rid of fear. Essentially, fear will remain the same; it is you who will change.

Respond to the fear

This is the key to being in charge of your own life. By following the first three of these steps you will free your true identity from fear's grasp. When you are no longer possessed by fear you will discover the one true power: the power to choose who and what you believe, and what you will and will not do.



For more information or to read excerpts from the book, visit <http://www.thomrutledge.com>.