

No Way. No How.

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I can still feel it in my right hand. That's the hand with which I held on for dear life to the grip bar above the passenger seat as I rode for the first time with each of my newly licensed children. I must confess that hard as I tried to appear to be relaxed and confident I failed. I was frightened. My children will tell you, my fear got in their way. There they were trying to remember all the details of driving a car while having to deal at the same time with their father's fear. And

there I was trying to support my children as they crossed a major threshold into independence.

I want to talk about that fear, not the logical fear of riding with an inexperienced driver at the wheel, but the existential fear, the fear of letting go that so easily and so often undermines our lives by causing us to doubt the strength and skill of those we love the best. Two of our three children drive and they drive pretty well. We paid good money for drivers ed not only to reduce the cost of insurance but also to try to protect them from our anxiety as they were learning. We also wanted someone other us to be responsible

for their driving skills. We wanted to pay someone, a reliable professional not only in the hope that they would be better teachers than we could ever be but also to allay our fears.

We will return to the spiritual implications of the notion that it's possible to purchase protection from our fears.

Suffice to say that I learned something about myself and perhaps even about the human condition as I slowly let go of that grip above the door and let my children drive. One of the key indications of spiritual maturity is the ability to live with ambiguity. Like the Chinese character that means both crisis and opportunity, resistance, this month's theological

theme has at least two distinct and interdependent meanings.

Resistance in a psycho-spiritual sense is the active, though usually unacknowledged, opposition to bringing unconscious material to light. There are aspects of ourselves we prefer to keep hidden even and especially from ourselves. Chief among these secrets is the existential fear, which all too often clouds our judgment and causes us to act in ways that don't reflect the better angels of our nature.

These past few years we've seen such psychological resistance writ large, as purveyors of fear have led our Nation astray; as hard-won, essential human rights have been denied

and set aside in the name of national security while we have
arguably become less and less secure as our actions have
caused even traditional allies to doubt our integrity and
question our intentions. The most vivid example of this kind
of resistance has been our reticence to confront, condemn
and end the use of torture. There is absolutely no support for
the claim that torture is an effective deterrence to terrorism.
In fact there is substantial evidence that our enemies point to
the fact that we torture prisoners as proof that we are in no
way who we claim to be.

Existential fear has allowed this to happen. Too many of us have been deluded into thinking we're in such horrific danger that we need to protect ourselves by any means necessary. The danger is real. The promise of protection is the lie. I want to acknowledge those among us who woke up from the cultivated fear and help to organize our opposition to the torturers. Nine days from now a new president will take the oath of office. We know we need to temper our expectations and step up to the obligations the change we seek will require. But we also know the world cries out for Barack Obama to say it plain. He couldn't risk it but I can't

help but wish he would include in his inaugural address these

words from Langston Hughes:

O, yes,

I say it plain,

America never was America to me,

And yet I swear this oath--

America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,

The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,

We, the people, must redeem

The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.

The mountains and the endless plain--

All, all the stretch of these great green states--

And make America again!

I pray that he will lead us up out of our resistance and denial

into a new day of justice and of reconciliation. Lord knows

it's going to take time. But pray with me these next nine

days, pray with me in solidarity with congregations all across

the country that President Obama will, in his first inaugural

address, begin to make America again by declaring an end to our involvement in torture and a new beginning to respectful engagement with our neighbors all around the world.

The second face of resistance refers to those who stand firm in the face of injustice, those who stand on the side of love, those who, like trees planted by the water, will not be moved. Next week Janne and Leon will help us to steel our wills for that kind of resistance. But for now let's come down from the steps of the Capital and return to the more personal ways fear undermines our lives.

When Hal and I sat down to talk about this service we found ourselves discussing the ways in which we resist change even when we know full well it's likely to be good for us. "Oh I know," I found myself saying, "Like all the people who resist assisted living. They imagine they are protecting their independence but then they wait too long and find themselves without any options." Hal smiled gently and said, "I think that's mostly about you." I was a bit taken aback. "Let me explain what I mean", he said. Aware that Hal has spent his professional life in service to elders I listened carefully to what he had to say.

He talked about how often fear clouds the judgment of grown-up children when they feel it's time to intervene in their aging parent's lives. He said that we live in a consumer culture, which works to convince us that we can purchase safety for a price. He pointed out that there are often creative responses, sometimes far less expensive than assisted living, which allow elders to maintain their dignity and independence.

I thought back to my own family history. My mother suffered from vascular dementia for the last few years of her life. When she began to forget where she had parked the car

we began to be concerned. After a number of minor accidents we conspired with her physician to convince her to voluntarily relinquish her license and keys. She was pleased with the letter she received from the Governor thanking her for making such a good decision and saying how grateful he was that she put the safety of others above her own convenience. We hoped she could continue to live independently but when the police found her wandering downtown confused and disoriented we knew the time had come.

The decision is rarely so straightforward. After my conversation with Hal I began to think back on the many families we've helped to find their way through the maze of these decisions. I thought about the number of elders I've known, people who seemed quite enlightened in their aging, who, when told by their children that the time for assisted living had come, dug in their heels and absolutely refused to move. "But mom (or Dad)," the children usually say, "don't you think it's wise to move before your health declines to the point where you have no choice?"

Florida Scott-Maxwell's words are ringing in my ears.

“I heard the animal growl in me when they did things to my precious privacy and independence to do for myself. I hated them while I breathed, “Thank you nurse.” When at last I was allowed a bath in the tub, I said, “Let me alone, I’ll do it myself,” and oh my relief when the dear woman laughed and said, “You’re the kind that get well quickly.”

Caring for our aging parents is no simple task. I can’t tell you how relieved I was once my mother moved into assisted living. Yes, I wanted her to be safe. It comforted me to know there were people being paid to protect her. But

I've come to believe that all too often we allow our existential fear undue influence in determining how best to proceed.

Caught up as we are in this consumer culture we're convinced we can buy our way out of the confusion and pain, which come with the loss of independence. There is ample evidence that when elders are able to stay in their homes, getting the help that they need while maintaining their independence, they tend to be happier, healthier and more productive. The challenge for their children is to make sure that our fear doesn't get in their way.

Just as our fears can cause us to underestimate our children's capacity for independence, those same fears all too often lead to premature and even disrespectful decisions about the wellbeing of our parents. As Mary Pipher reminds us: "...helping parents through their last years is one of our best chances to grow up." Mature human beings are capable of honest, loving engagement. It's a discipline. It's a practice. It's the key to healthy, satisfying family life. It's what makes neighborhoods and nations thrive. It portends and fosters the possibility of peace.

She is leading her old father into the future

as far as they can go, and she is walking
him back into her childhood, where she stood
in bare feet on the toes of his shoes
and they foxtrotted on this same rug.
I watch them closely: she could be teaching him
the last steps that one day she may teach me.
At this moment, he glints and shines,
as if it will be only a small dislocation
for him to pass from this paradise into the next.

May it be so and amen.

