

FEAR. EARLY AND
POWERFUL

You are lying on your back in the dark. Wet. Cold. Hunger and thirst throb and throb. They are you, and you are nothing but pain. You try to scream, and you somehow make a sound come out—but nothing happens. You try, or start to try, to move, to go somewhere, anywhere, out of this agony. But your limbs won't move. You can't make them do anything but wave uselessly in the air. You see, you hear, you feel. But you can't move or act. You are completely, simply, helpless.

This is the stuff of nightmare. Most of us have nightmares of helplessness, in which we try to run away from some terrible danger, but our legs won't move, or we try to scream but no sound comes out, or nobody hears it. In those nightmares we feel a terrible fear of the bad people or monsters who are

pursuing us, but an even greater fear, and maybe also hatred, of our own powerlessness.

But this horror story is also the unremarkable daily life of every human baby. Calves, colts, baby elephants, puppies, giraffes, dolphins—all other animals learn to move very quickly, more or less right after birth. If they can't stand upright, nurse, and, very soon, walk or swim alongside the mother, using their own bodies to get the food that they need, they are severely defective, and they will almost certainly die. Helplessness means the end. Human beings alone are helpless for a very long time, and human beings alone survive that helpless condition. As the first-century BCE Roman poet Lucretius, one of my favorite guiding spirits in thinking about emotions, puts it, the baby

like a sailor cast forth from the fierce waves, lies naked on the ground, unable to speak, in need of every sort of help to stay alive, when first nature casts it forth with birth contractions from its mother's womb into the shores of light. And it fills the whole place with mournful weeping, as is fitting for one to whom such trouble remains in life.(5.222-7)¹

¹Titus Lucretius Carus lived from around 99 to 55 BCE, thus during the beginning of the long decline of the Roman Republic into tyranny. A disciple of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE), he created a six-book epic poem in dactylic hexameters to disseminate Epicurus's teachings about fear, aggression, and the structure of the universe. Since he had access to more of Epicurus's writing than we do, it is difficult to say how much he innovated, but certainly all of the brilliant poetic imagery and at least some of the philosophy (especially portions reconciling Epicureanism with Roman values) is his own. There are many good translations. In this book I make my own, rather flat-footed and literal, but my favorite to

Other animals, he drily remarks, have no need of rattles or baby talk; they don't need different clothing for different seasons. They don't need to arm themselves, they don't need high city walls. After all, the earth and nature herself provide everything that any other animal needs.

We come into a world that we are not ready to cope with. (And in a crucial sense we never really are.) Terribly soft and vulnerable, we lie there helpless, waiting for others to provide what we need—food, comfort, and reassurance. After the soothing undulations of life in the womb, its automatic nourishment and unproblematic excretion, there is suddenly a violent separateness, the slap of the cold air, and a painful solitary powerlessness. The discrepancy between the very slow physical development of the human infant and its rapid cognitive development is in many respects a nightmare story.² You see what you need, but you can't move to get it. You feel pain, but you cannot remove it. Later nightmares no doubt recall this early torment. Neurological research on fear concludes that the scars of early fright stimuli endure, resisting change.³

And you really are aware of what is happening to you.⁴ By

capture the spirit of the poetry is that of Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

²A brilliant re-creation, based in detail on what we now know from research, is psychologist Daniel Stern's *Diary of a Baby* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); a more prosaic version is in his *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

³See discussion of LeDoux below.

⁴My views therefore reject Freud's simple hedonism, which does not attribute to infants much in the way of awareness of objects; here, as in other work, I follow the "object-relations" school of thinkers such as W. R. D.

the age of one month an infant can tell the difference between its own parents and other people, although it is only much later that it can really see a person as a whole person or understand that the flashing images of movement in and out of its field of vision are stable substances. Indeed, it takes months even to grasp the distinction between parts of the infant's own body (feet, hands) and physical objects outside its body. Infants constantly experiment with sameness and externality, grabbing their own toes, putting into their mouths first parts of themselves (thumbs, fingers) and parts of non-self (blanket ends, pacifiers). Still, all of that learning unfolds—and mere yelling gradually becomes semi-articulate syllables—long before an infant can walk, or even crawl, on its own.

We usually survive this condition. We do not survive it without being formed, and deformed, by it. Fear, genetically first among the emotions, persists beneath all and infects them all, nibbling around the edges of love and reciprocity.

There are good times, too. As Lucretius understands, the world of pain is also a world of delight. "Into the shores of light" is where we have come, into a world of amazing beauty and excitement. Light entrances, and virtually an infant's first voluntary movement is to follow light with its eyes. But incipient joy and love are soon overwhelmed by the pain of need.

There are also times of a quieter comfort. You suck at the

Fairbairn and especially Donald Winnicott, who is now the dominant force in US psychoanalytic training. Melanie Klein is close to this school but a unique figure defying categorization. Detailed discussions of the views of all three are in my *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 5.

breast or bottle. You are held on a warm body that smells a little sweet, a little salty. You are enclosed by soothing arms. But you didn't make that happen. Somehow it just happened to you, and you have as yet no sense of how you could make it happen when you need it. Even when you begin to discover that screaming is regularly followed (after an interval) by feeding and comfort, it's still not as if you can comfort or feed yourself. The only way you can get what you need is to make some other part of the world get it for you.

Politics begins where we begin. Most political philosophers have been males, and even if they had children they did not typically spend time with them or observe them closely. Lucretius's poetic imagination already led him to places where his life probably did not. But philosophy made big steps when one of democracy's great early theorists, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a major intellectual architect of the revolutionary anti-monarchical politics of the eighteenth century, wrote about the education of children with a deep understanding of the psychology of infancy and its dangers for the democratic project.⁵ Rousseau was the opposite of a loving parent: indeed he sent all his children (four or five, all illegitimate) to a foundling hospital on birth, and did not even record their dates of birth. Somehow, though, through his various experiments in teaching other people's young children, through conversations with

⁵Rousseau's views are not mine; his *On the Social Contract* prescribes a coercive homogeneity of thought and speech under the rubric of the "civil religion," not making room for the liberties of speech, press, and association that were so dear to his US counterparts and to British thinkers such as John Locke and, later, John Stuart Mill.

women, through memories of his own childhood, through his close reading of Lucretius and other Roman philosophers, and through his own poetic imagination, he understood how early need creates problems for the type of political order he sought.

Human life, Rousseau understood, begins not in democracy but in monarchy. The baby, on whom caregivers ardently dote, has no way of surviving except by making slaves of others. Babies are so weak that they must either rule or die. Incapable of shared work or reciprocity, they can get things only by commands and threats, and by exploiting the worshipful love given them by others.⁶ (In letters, Rousseau made it clear that this was why he abandoned his children: he just didn't have time to be at a baby's beck and call.)

What emotions begin to take root in the infant's unfolding life? In the womb it's hard to speak of emotions, although toward the end there are eventually sensations—because emotions require some awareness, however confused, of external objects and some thoughts, however rudimentary and unformed, about those objects. Emotions, then, fit the post-birth world in which we are separated from the sources of good, longing for their presence, dimly aware that they are out there somewhere, uncontrolled by us. To the infant trapped in this nightmare

⁶Rousseau, *Emile: or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), Book I, pp. 62–67, esp. p. 66: "Thus, from their weakness, which is in the first place the source of the feeling of their dependence, is subsequently born the idea of empire and domination." Rousseau believes that one can begin resisting this fearful dependence very early, by encouraging free movement and self-sufficient care of self. I don't follow the details of his views, but develop his initial insight in my own way, influenced by psychologists like Stern and especially by the views of Winnicott.

scenario, one overwhelming emotion, and a formative influence on daily life, is fear. Adults are amused by the baby's futile kicking and undisturbed by its crying, since they know they are going to feed, clothe, protect, and care for it. They respond to its evident need for comfort by holding it close, by speaking baby talk (known even in ancient Rome!), by making rocking motions, simulating the safety of the womb. But adults themselves don't fear, because they don't think anything bad is going on—unless there are other danger signals such as fever or inability to tolerate milk. The infant's world, however, knows nothing of trust, regularity, or security. Its limited experience and short time horizons mean that only the present torment is fully real while it lasts, and moments of joyful reassurance, fleeting and unstable, all too quickly lead back into insufficiency and terror. Even the joy itself is soon tainted by anxiety, since to the infant it seems fleeting, all too likely to slip away.

DEFINING FEAR

Philosophers are fond of definitions, and so are psychologists. Within each field there is disagreement about fear, but a common ground of consensus has emerged, in the light of recent interdisciplinary research on both human and animal emotions. This consensus includes the idea that almost all emotions (in both humans and other animals) involve some sort of information processing about the animal's well-being. Even non-linguistic animals have thoughts, in some form, of what's good and bad for them, and these thoughts are incorporated into their emotions. Thus, emotions are not like mindless

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jolts of energy: they focus outward on the world and appraise objects and events in the world. Typically, they register our animal vulnerability, our dependence on and attachment to things outside ourselves that we do not fully control. (This is why the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics were in favor of eliminating almost all emotions, apart from some, like wonder at the universe, or a serene joy at one's own integrity, that did not seem to them to involve an unwise dependence on "goods of fortune.")⁷

Fear is not only the earliest emotion in human life, it is also the most broadly shared within the animal kingdom. To have compassion you need a pretty sophisticated set of thoughts: that someone else is suffering, that this suffering is bad, that it would be good for it to be relieved. Some animals have this emotion (apes, elephants), but it requires relatively complex thinking. To have full-blown anger, rather than just irritation or primitive rage, you have to be capable of causal thinking: someone did something to me, and it was wrong. But to have fear, all you need is an awareness of danger looming. Aristotle defined fear as pain at the seeming presence of some impending bad thing, combined with a feeling that you are powerless to ward it off.⁸ That's pretty good. The thoughts involved don't require language, they only require perception, and some sense, however vague, of one's own good or ill. Something bad is looming, and I am stuck.

⁷I build a case for this overall view, drawing on both philosophy and psychology, in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Some parts of my picture are controversial, but not the general ideas expressed here.

⁸Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382a21–5.

What about feelings? Fear is certainly accompanied by some powerful subjective feelings; often people mention a “trembling” or a “shaking.” Should we put that into the definition, saying that if that isn’t there, the emotion can’t really be fear? There are three reasons why we should not. First, different people experience fear differently, depending on their history and character. Do we really want to say that a courageous soldier must be trembling in his boots if he retains a normal human fear of death? Aristotle said that even the most courageous do fear death, and they’d be crazy not to.⁹ We don’t want soldiers who hold life cheap. But in the case of the disciplined soldier, the awareness of danger isn’t usually felt as a trembling.

We can go even further: in many cases people have fear without even being aware of it. Every day, most of us are motivated in quite a lot of what we do by the fear of death. We don’t walk in front of cars (unless we hold our smartphones dearer than life!). We try to guard our health, we go to the doctor, etc. The fear of death is often very useful, but it is usually non-conscious, just like the belief in gravity, or the belief in the solidity of physical objects—non-conscious, but everywhere relied on.

We don’t need a psychoanalytic doctrine of repression to tell us that fear often lurks beneath the surface of the mind. But I think that we can, and should, go further: it is of the essence of peaceful daily life that we push that fear to the back of our minds. Lucretius, probably the first theorist of unconscious fear, remarks that this effort sometimes becomes a burden.

⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.9, 1117b7–16.

So instead of a trembling, we may have a feeling of a "large mountain sitting on our chest." Or we have frenetic avoidance behavior, restless activity that seems aimed at nothing but self-distraction. Think of air travel. Some people have a conscious fear of flying. Many more of us, however, push that fear to the back of our minds but still feel an inner weight or tension, and a more than usual need to distract ourselves with email, or food, or aimless conversation. We may be simply more irritable than usual, or less able to concentrate.

Finally, scientists tend, these days, to agree with Aristotle, who was a great biologist and who theorized a lot about the emotions of animals: all animals, not just humans, feel fear of something bad out there that seems likely to harm them.¹⁰ It's generally believed that fear evolved because of its role in keeping animals alive. But if we are to talk about the way fear feels to a rat, what should we say it feels like? We can be sure that animals have rich subjective experience, but it would be very rash to pretend to know what they feel.

Fear does involve feelings, then, but it's hard to define fear in terms of any particular type of feeling. We are on safer ground when we stick to the sort of awareness of objects as good or bad that seems an unavoidably central part of fear, and necessary to explain animal behavior. So, let's by all means say that the subjective side of fear is important, and let's call poets and novelists to our aid in describing its many types and instances. But let's focus, for now, on the awareness of objects that holds all the cases together.

¹⁰Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, many references throughout.

What about the brain? Here we need to learn from recent research. In his important book *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*,¹¹ neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux has given a masterful account of how the emotion of fear has a particularly close connection with the amygdala, an almond-shaped organ at the base of the brain. When creatures report fear, or their behavior is reasonably explained as fear, the amygdala is aroused. And LeDoux has also shown that certain specific triggers elicit fear-related responses in humans, no doubt through stored evolutionary mechanisms: the shape of the snake, for example, always gets the amygdala going.

The amygdala is an unusually primitive organ. All vertebrates have it, no matter what the level of the rest of their perceptual and cognitive apparatus, and have it in recognizably the same form. Clearly, the role of the amygdala helps explain why fear belongs to all animals. In experiencing fear, we draw on a common animal heritage, and not just a primate or even vertebrate heritage. Fear goes straight back to the reptilian brain.

LeDoux is careful not to say that fear is "in" the amygdala, or that knowing about the amygdala's role fully explains fear. First of all, he has not experimented on humans. Second, he is perfectly aware that in all animals, fear relies on the entire network and that the amygdala functions only in virtue of its role in a more complex system. If this is true in rats, it is all the more likely to be true for humans. Humans' information about danger comes from many sources, perceptual, linguistic, intellectual. Moreover, the human brain is reasonably plastic, and

¹¹New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

there are likely to be many differences among individuals in the ways their brains process a single emotion.

We can't have a good account of fear by simply describing brain states, then. A good account will need to speak about creatures' subjective awareness of objects, and their vague or inchoate thoughts of situations or objects as bad for the self (which might itself be a vague inchoate concept in most animals and in human infants). This awareness is mediated, as time goes on, by learning. We learn the map of our world, and learn what is good and bad in it. This makes fear seem more human and less primitive. Still, it's worth emphasizing that fear is an emotion that a rat can have in not too different a form from a small human. Rats too have a mental map of good and bad, though without language or higher thought. And even if our first primal experiences of fear are followed, later, by complicated, learned forms of that emotion, LeDoux emphasizes that early fright conditioning has lasting effects on the organism; it proves very difficult to undo. We all know how fear swells up in times of danger, how it drives our dreams.

FEAR'S POLITICS

Fear is not just primitive, it is also asocial. When we feel compassion, we are turned outward: we think of what is happening to others and what is causing it. We don't ascribe compassion to an animal unless we think that it is part of some rich social network. Dogs, apes, and elephants probably do care compassionately about the fortunes of other creatures in their world. Scientists who work on these species conclude that they have complicated

forms of social awareness, and the emotions that go with that. But you don't need society to have fear; you need only yourself and a threatening world. Fear, indeed, is intensely narcissistic. It drives out all thoughts of others, even if those thoughts have taken root in some form. An infant's fear is entirely focused on its own body. Even when, later on, we become capable of concern for others, fear often drives that concern away, returning us to infantile solipsism. Soldiers describe the experience of fear in combat as involving a vivid inward focus on their whole body, which becomes their whole world.¹² (This is why military training has to focus so obsessively on building team loyalty—because it has to counter a deep contrary tendency.)

Or think of our anxious interactions with the medical profession. When we get threatening medical news—or even when we go for a regular checkup and think we might possibly get some bad news—we are likely to be totally self-focused and on high alert. (The common experience of a rise in blood pressure at the doctor's office is one sign of the return of helplessness-anxiety.) Often, of course, we do fear for our children and other loved ones, and are on high alert for them. But that just means that the self has become bigger, and the intense painful awareness of danger to your larger self drives out thought of the wider world.

The great novelist Marcel Proust imagines a child (his

¹²One remarkable depiction is in Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Brian Murdoch (London: Random House, 1994; original German publication 1929), p. 37. Remarque served on the Western Front for several months at the age of eighteen, before being seriously wounded in combat; he spent the rest of the war in an army hospital.

narrator) who remains unusually prone to fear, especially at bedtime.¹³ What project does terror suggest to young Marcel? That he should make his mother come to his room, stay, and leave as late as possible. (He notes that the comfort of her presence is already tainted by the awareness that she is soon to depart.) Marcel's fear makes him need to control others. He has no interest in what would make his mother happy. Dominated by fear, he just needs her to be at his command. This pattern marks all his subsequent relationships, particularly that with Albertine, his great love. He cannot stand Albertine's independence. It makes him too anxious. Lack of full control makes him crazy with fear and jealousy. The sad result, which he narrates with great self-knowledge, is that he feels secure with Albertine only when she is asleep. He never really loves her as she is, because as she is she is not his own.

Proust supports Rousseau's point: fear is the emotion of an absolute monarch, who cares about nothing and nobody else. (Rousseau thought the kings of France could not have compassion for the people they rule, since they could not imagine any type of common world, or reciprocity, with them.¹⁴) It didn't have to be that way. Other animals can act on their own almost as soon as they fear, and their fear, so far as we can tell, remains within bounds and doesn't impede concern and cooperation. Elephants, for example, are acting reciprocally with their herd group almost from birth. They run to adult females for comfort, but they also play games with other young elephants or

¹³Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), vol. I.

¹⁴See *Emile*, book IV.

with adults, they gradually learn the emotion vocabulary that makes elephant life peculiarly communal and altruistic.

The human baby, powerless, has only one way of getting what it wants: using other people.

CONCERN, RECIPROCITY, PLAY

How do infants overcome the narcissism of fear? Our bleak narrative must now become more subtle, because we know that we are much more than that imperious baby, forcing others to do its bidding. And thinking about how we extricate ourselves from infantile narcissism might help us think about how to extricate ourselves from our very narcissistic and anxiety-driven political moment.

Times of comfort and delight give rise to love and gratitude. These emotions are both developmentally later and structurally more complicated than fear. Love that is more than narcissistic need requires the ability to think about the other person as a separate person, to imagine what that other person feels and wants, and to allow that person a separate, non-slave life. It involves, then, a move out of monarchy in the direction of democratic reciprocity.

This movement is uneven, lurching, and uncertain, but the ability to imagine another person's life aids it, as does a return of love prompted by the caretakers' evident love and good will. Probably gratitude and reciprocal love have an evolutionary basis. The bonding between parents and children that is necessary for species survival requires at least limited reciprocity. Parents need to feel that they get some return for

all their investment—a reason why care for children with profound emotional disabilities (severe autism, for example) is so agonizingly difficult. In prehistory, such children would probably have been abandoned. Psychologists doing experimental work on infants (Yale's Paul Bloom in particular) believe that the ability to enter the world of the caretaker—to be a "mind reader"—arrives very early. That ability is clearly essential for normal human adulthood.¹⁵ Robert Hare's study of psychopaths concludes that the absence of "mind reading" and of genuine reciprocal concern are hallmarks of these deeply maimed individuals, who are probably born, not made.¹⁶

Still, the rest of us all have tendencies that mimic psychopathy, in the form of our normal human narcissism. All too often we don't stop to think about what our words and actions mean for the inner lives of others. Maybe we can't even figure it out, if the others are very different from us. All too often, even when we do make an effort, it is for people in a narrow circle, our family, our group: for that "larger self" I spoke of—so our use of our own moral capacities remains fundamentally narcissistic. And all too often, even when we know full well what our words and actions mean for others—that they will inflict pain or humiliation, or impose a difficult burden—we just don't care. The narcissistic anxious world in which we began swells up again in time of need and fear, jeopardizing our halting steps toward moral adulthood and constructive citizenship.

¹⁵See Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

¹⁶Robert D. Hare, *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

Eighteenth-century philosopher Adam Smith, an early opponent of both colonial conquest and the slave trade, observed that it is difficult for people to sustain concern for people at a distance, when fear can so easily call the mind back to the self. His example is an earthquake in China. Hearing of the disaster, a humane person in Europe will be extremely upset and concerned—for a while. But if that same person hears that he (Smith typically imagines males) will lose his little finger the following day, he will completely forget the fate of millions of people: "the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him than this paltry misfortune of his own."¹⁷

What can early interactions with children do to make our steps toward others a little less halting? Thinking about this will give us our first clues to productive social responses.

So long as the young child feels helpless, unable to be alone without fear, reciprocity and love will not flourish. Donald Winnicott, a great psychoanalyst who was also a pediatrician, observing thousands of healthy children, concluded that the dark story of terror and monarchical enslavement rarely prevails.¹⁸ Life usually works out better than that, albeit uneasily and with much backsliding. Gradually, the infant develops the capacity to be alone. How does this happen? One key thing Winnicott

¹⁷Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1982), III.3.5, p. 136.

¹⁸Winnicott was a prolific writer, but especially important for this chapter are *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1965), and *Playing and Reality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1971).

observed was the role of what he called "transitional objects," the blankets and stuffed animals that very young children use to comfort themselves when parents are absent. (He loved Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and wondered whether Linus's blanket showed the influence of his ideas.) Cuddling a blanket or teddy bear calms fear, and so the child does not need to boss its parents around so much; the groundwork for what Winnicott called "mature interdependence" begins to be laid.

Eventually the child usually develops the ability to "play alone in the presence of its mother," amusing itself without needing to call for the parent all the time, even though he or she might be within sight or earshot. (Winnicott made it clear that "mother" was a role not a specific gendered person; he prided himself on his own maternal qualities, and often identified with female characters in books and movies.) Security and confidence begin to make healthy reciprocity possible.

At this point, a child begins to be able to relate to its parents as whole people, rather than as an extension of its own needs. The democratic self is ready to be born.

This stage, Winnicott thought, typically leads to a painful emotional crisis: for the child now understands that the very same person whom it loves and embraces is the person against whom it has directed its aggressive and angry wishes when its needs met with frustration. But here real moral life begins: for out of dismay at its own aggression, the child gradually develops a "capacity for concern": the parent must not be destroyed, and I must become the sort of person that does not destroy. Morality operates in tandem with love, since it is love that leads the child to feel the badness of its own aggression. Imaginative

play, Winnicott thought, plays a key role in this development. Through stories, songs, and games, enacting stories happy and scary with stuffed animals, dolls, and other toys, children make a map of the world's possibilities and of the insides of other people. They start to become capable of generosity and altruism. Winnicott always emphasized the ethical and political role of the arts, which continue, for adults, the healthy role of play in the young child's life. "We are poor indeed," he said, "if we are only sane."¹⁹

Children cannot achieve emotional maturity on their own. They need stable and loving care, and care of a sort that reassures them that even their fear and aggression do not cancel the parent's love. Overcoming fear—to the extent that we ever can—is a relational matter. Love and holding supply the first phase of what Winnicott calls the "facilitating environment." The parent must receive the child's hate and not be terrified or depressed—and Winnicott emphasized that most parents do this well enough. He or she must "continue to be herself, to be empathic towards her infant, to be there to receive the spontaneous gesture, and to be pleased."

But if we thought of young childhood as a happy place full of games, toys, and teddy bears, we would be fooling ourselves. The horrible darkness of early fear is always beneath the surface, easily awakened into nightmare by any destabilizing new development: a childhood illness, the illness or death of a parent, the birth of a new sibling.

Gabrielle was two and a half when her parents brought her

¹⁹Winnicott repeated this phrase periodically, but one instance is in *The Family and Individual Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 1965), 61.

to Winnicott for treatment.²⁰ After the birth of a younger sister, the little girl was crippled with anxieties and nightmares. Their central theme was a terrible dark danger menacing her, somehow connected to the new baby and her parents' attention to her. She imagined a horrid dark train called a "babacar" carrying her to some unknown place. A "black mommy" loomed over her, trying to hurt her, but was also inside her and made her black. Worst of all was the "Sush baba," a nightmare version of the new infant. (Her baby sister's name was Susan.)

Gabrielle (known in the analysis by her nickname, "the Piggle") had loving, attentive, and playful parents. Her father even joined the analysis, and there is a lovely description of how, at Winnicott's urging, he mimed the birth of the new child by sliding down Winnicott's body onto the floor. She was obviously an unusually sensitive child; not all children are crippled by anxiety at such "normal" events. But it's important to remember that the fears that brought Gabrielle to Winnicott are in all children to some degree, even if they manifest themselves less severely, or are less noticed by sensitive and observant parents. Her story is unique; but it can also stand for all of us, since young childhood is a time of recurrent fear and insecurity.

The analysis continued at periodic intervals (dictated by the child's own requests) until Gabrielle was five. Winnicott's notes show that a key to the analysis was his utter respect for the child's inner world and his remarkable ability to enter

²⁰D. W. Winnicott, *The Piggle: An Account of the Psychoanalytic Treatment of a Little Girl* (London: Penguin, 1977).

into it. Almost his first remark, in notes of the first session, is, "Already I had made friends with the teddy-bear who was sitting on the floor by the desk." Winnicott made both Gabrielle and her parents feel secure, establishing an atmosphere of "holding" in which fear could gradually be expressed and ultimately abate. The game in which her father pretended to be a baby is a typical example of Winnicott's creative insight: for if the father mimes the terrors of infancy, thus making himself vulnerable—and does so, I would add, in a comic way, producing laughter and delight—this helps the child manage her own fears. Similarly, the helpless fear and aggression that Gabrielle feels toward the new baby is made into a funny game, in which she hits Winnicott with a pretend rolling pin. The game gives her perspective, helping her to master her aggression.

At the end of the analysis, Gabrielle has to bid farewell to Winnicott himself, a potential trauma. As the two sit together, Winnicott remarks, "So the Winnicott you invented was all yours and he's now finished with, and no one else can ever have him." (In this way he reminds Gabrielle that they have a unique relationship. She was afraid that her baby sister would displace her in her parents' love, and now she is bound to be afraid that new patients will displace her in Winnicott's love. But that's not how love works—it is a unique bond, he says.) The two sit together, reading an animal book. Then he says, "I know when you are really shy, and that is when you want to tell me that you love me." "She was very positive in her gesture of assent."

In 2017, Deborah Luepnitz, an analyst in Philadelphia, corresponded with a fellow therapist, who then chose to reveal

herself as "Gabrielle." Luepnitz then did a long interview with her, recently published.²¹ Gabrielle had herself become a psychoanalytic therapist. She told Luepnitz that in her view it was highly significant that her mother's family were Czech Jews and refugees from the Holocaust. (Her father was an Irish protestant.) Gabrielle's own real name was Esther. The parents, it turns out, were themselves still so paralyzed by fear that they were unable to call her by her real name, which, as she puts it, "holds the family's Jewish history and trauma." She remembers relatively little of the analysis, but she does remember the game with the rolling pin, and how she felt guilty because she knew Winnicott had been sick and she had made him "play very hard." It is striking that this moment of awakening concern for the other is her sharpest memory.

THE FACILITATING ENVIRONMENT, PART I

Gabrielle's case reminds us that childhood is inherently a terrifying time. Concern, love, and reciprocity are staggering achievements, won against fierce opposition. Winnicott concluded that most parents, by far, do a good job. Children don't need perfection, and the demand for perfection often makes parents stressed out in a way that harms both parent and child. They only need holding that is "good enough." But Winnicott lived through two world wars and saw many children

²¹Deborah Anna Luepnitz, "The Name of the Piggle: Reconsidering Winnicott's Classic Case in Light of Some Conversations with the Adult 'Gabrielle,'" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 98 (2017), 343-70.

traumatized by separation, absence, and violence. (Maybe Gabrielle's mother had unwittingly transmitted to her child some of the terror of the Holocaust that she evidently felt: the "baba-car" seems eerily like German transport trains.) He also knew well that parents can inflict deep emotional or even physical abuse on their children. He himself was harmed by a pathologically depressed mother and a cruel father who taunted him for his gender nonconformity.²² He said that this "violation of the self's core" was more painful than "being eaten by cannibals." Its result was that he was sexually impotent until middle age—when he met his second wife Claire, a social worker, gender nonconforming in her own way, and also funny, kind, and joyful. So Winnicott knew that the baseline conditions for surmounting fear without damage are not always met.

Winnicott invented a concept for what children need, if concern for others is to grow and flourish. He called these conditions the "facilitating environment." In a first phase, he applied this concept to the family: it must have a core of basic loving stability (as his own did not). It must be free from sadism and child abuse (as his was not). But the minute we think about families in wartime, we also see that the facilitating environment has economic and social preconditions as well: there must be basic freedom from violence and chaos, from fears of ethnic persecution and terror; there must be enough to eat and basic health care. Working with children evacuated from war zones, he understood the psychic costs of external chaos. So

²²For all the material in this section, see F. Robert Rodman, *Winnicott: Life and Work* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2003).

even this first phase is already inflected by political concerns: what should we be striving for as a nation, if we want children to become capable of concern, reciprocity, and also happiness? Because Winnicott recognized (as many psychoanalysts do not) that the personal and the political are inseparable, he kept returning to political questions throughout his career. We'll examine this second phase further, but we must never forget that the two "phases" interpenetrate from the beginning. Even the ultimately happy Gabrielle was scarred by the Holocaust as well as by the birth of a new sibling.

Before we reach the second phase, however, we arrive at another terrifying discovery.

DEATH ENTERS THE MIND

At first, fear responds to hunger, thirst, darkness, wetness, and the helplessness of not being able to do anything about these bad things. As time goes on, a new idea enters the picture, an idea surely implicit in our evolutionary fear responses from the beginning: the idea of death. The infant is not aware of death, or of its own mortality. But its responses have evolved to serve survival, so we could say that in a sense, fear of hunger and thirst, even of the absence of comfort, is a fear of death. A vague fear of death may well be innate, an evolutionary advantage. And even the most loving parents transmit to young children their own fear of the "babacar," in times of family illness or political upheaval. So, we are preconditioned to avoid and fear mortality.

This innate or at least very early shrinking colors early fears. Even when a child has no explicit awareness of death, mortality

colors the terror of childhood nightmares. The child fears a black emptiness, or a fall from an infinite height, or a devouring monster. When caretakers are gone, there is a terrible fear that they won't return—the source of babies' endless delight in games of disappearance and reappearance, as a loved toy, or the parent, vanishes suddenly, to reappear again to delighted giggles.

Gabrielle's nightmare fantasies clearly alluded to death: the "babacar," apparently taking her to annihilation; the devouring "black mother"; above all, the menacing "Sush baby," who threatened Gabrielle with extinction. Fear of loss of parental love and attention figured in her imagination as a kind of death. And why not? At that age she was unable to imagine a future of stability and the continuity of love. To a very young child, every temporary loss is a death. The central work of the three-year analysis with Winnicott was to produce trust: the sense that disruptions are not actually fatal, that teddy bears, analysts, and parents all survive and continue to love.

However well that lesson is learned, the child all too soon learns another darker one: that some animals and people do not reappear. Deaths of siblings and parents used to be routine events, and young children quickly learned to see the world, and their own existence, as a very fragile place. By the eighteenth century, Rousseau thought that his hypothetical pupil Emile might not see enough death to get the idea of his own vulnerability, so his imagined teacher begins talking about death by directing Emile to the deaths of small animals.²³

As soon as children learn the idea of death, they pose many

²³*Emile*, book IV.

questions, and they soon figure out that they themselves will die. Children react to this discovery in different ways, but always with a sense of deep dread and disturbance. When I was six—an anxious time for me, since my younger sister had just been born, and I felt that my parents were no longer interested in their former one and only—my grandmother took me to see Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera. She had no interest in opera, and had no idea that anyone would be deeply moved by one, so she didn't recognize how odd her choice was. Seated in the third row of the orchestra, I was transfixed and traumatized. For weeks after that, I acted out with my dolls the concluding scene in which the dying Gilda (murdered by mistake because she has willingly taken the place of the fickle Duke, whom she loves) is handed to Rigoletto in a sealed sack. The jester looks inside, expecting to see the body of his hated enemy—and recoils with horror as he realizes that the sack actually contains his beloved child, about to breathe her last. I am sure the sack represented, to me, the mortal threat of my sister's birth and the way it took my breath away. But it also represented my budding awareness of my own mortality. The doll I put into the sack, when I reenacted the opera later, was Jo in my *Little Women* family of dolls, the one who represented me. When I opened the doll sack I was witnessing, and rehearsing, my own death. (I've been an opera fan ever since, and I believe that those powerful music-dramas are forms of Winnicottian play in which we deepen our insight, and even learn to breathe in the midst of tragedy.)

The fear of death has a lot to be said for it. It motivates us to pursue safety, health, and even peace. It moves us to shelter those we love, and to protect institutions and laws that we

love. Furthermore, when we recognize that we are mortal, this should remind us that we are profoundly equal. However much the kings and nobles of France might try to lord it over their subjects, they could not honestly deny that they were similar in the most important matter of all. That recognition might produce, as Rousseau devoutly hoped, compassion and reciprocity: we can band together to protect one another from hunger, disease, and war.

But the fear of death is also terrifying, and it envelops us always. Unlike other childhood fears it cannot be undone by reassurance. Parents who have left the room will return. New siblings do not remove parental love. We soon learn (sort of) that there is no monster in the closet, there is no witch who eats little children. But the fear of death is never false, and no learning can remove it. The babacar speeds onward into the darkness. Thus, fear persists beneath the fabric of daily life, producing good results, as Rousseau said. But it also leads to many strategies of narcissism, self-avoidance, and denial.

Lucretius claimed that the fear of death is the cause of all other fears in human life. This seems wrong. Life is just difficult, and it contains a lot to fear. Our human vulnerability itself is the source of fear, and only part of this fear is directed at death, since death is only one aspect of our vulnerability. The Greeks and Romans imagined gods who were immortal and who nonetheless could suffer many things: physical pain (Prometheus, his liver eaten eternally by a vulture), maiming (Uranus, castrated by his son, his testicles thrown into the sea), the loss of children (Zeus, mourning his dead son Sarpedon), and humiliation (Hera, betrayed countless times by her

husband). They knew, then, that immortality wouldn't remove fear. Still, Lucretius was probably right to think that the fear of death "suffuses" our lives with "the blackness of death," even if there is plenty of light and happiness around.

FEAR'S RHETORIC AND DEMOCRATIC ERROR

Fear makes us want to avoid disaster. But it certainly does not tell us how. In evolutionary prehistory, humans followed fear's instinctual prompting, fleeing predators and other deeply implanted dangers. In our complicated world, however, we can't rely on instinct, we have to think, and we had better think well. We need a conception of our well-being, and of what, and who, threatens it. In all societies this process of shaping fear is pervasively influenced by culture, politics, and rhetoric. Aristotle, remember, discussed fear in a treatise on rhetoric for future politicians. In order to persuade people to do what you want, he says, you have to understand how their emotions work, and then you can tailor what you say to their own psychology. Aristotle knew, of course, that people will use this advice for both good ends and bad.

Fear involves the thought of an imminent threat to our own well-being. Aristotle tells political speakers that they will be able to whip up fear only if (a) they portray the impending event as highly significant for survival or well-being, if (b) they make people think it is close at hand, and if, further (c) they make people feel that things are out of control—they can't ward off the bad thing easily on their own. They also have to

trust the speaker, he adds, so speakers must arrange to seem trustworthy.²⁴ Obviously, this advice will not always be used in the service of truth. Through our basic propensity to fear, democratic societies are highly vulnerable to manipulation.

The ancient Greek historian Thucydides tells a grim tale of democratic error.²⁵ The Athenians had voted to execute all the men of the rebellious colony of Mytilene, and to enslave the women and children. But they then calmed down and began to reconsider, reflecting on the terrible cruelty of condemning an entire city for a rebellion led by just a few—a crime that would likely count as genocide in modern terms. A demagogic orator named Cleon, who had initially proposed the vote for death, stepped forward to argue against any change of heart. Cleon, a fiery populist, made people both frightened and angry: this rebellion threatened Athenian safety, because all other colonies will rebel if they see they can get away with it. He portrayed the danger as imminent: Athenians will shortly have to risk their lives again and again.

Cleon prevailed. A ship was already on the way to carry out the lethal resolution. But then a different orator, Diodotus, stepped forward and, in a soothing and deliberate way, persuaded the assembly that their previous vote had indeed been wrong. People should not allow themselves to be stampeded by fear and anger: they should calmly consider their own future interests. There was no urgent danger, their safety was not really threatened by the rebellion, and it would be a serious

²⁴On fear, see *Rhetoric* II.5, *passim*. On trustworthiness, *Rhetoric* I.2, 9.

²⁵Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (many translations), III.25–28, 35–50; the debate took place in 427 BCE.

error to commit acts of lethal aggression that would lose Athens the loyalty of many current allies.

The Athenians reversed their position and sent another ship to catch the first. By sheer luck, the first ship was becalmed, and the second one was able to catch up to it. By such a narrow thread hung thousands of lives. Even without deciding which speaker was correct, we can be sure one was wrong—and Thucydides makes it abundantly clear that he thinks Cleon is both wrong and, in his manipulative populist approach, a danger to the very survival of democracy at Athens. Fear can be manipulated by true and false information, producing both appropriate and inappropriate reactions.

How does error creep in? First, people have to have an idea of their own well-being and the well-being of society; there are many ways in which we can get this wrong. It's particularly easy to think too narrowly, equating social well-being with the well-being of our own group or class and forgetting the contributions of others. Cleon did this in a way that should strike us as familiar: by urging people to have a narrow view of Athenian supremacy that excludes allies and dependents. He "othered" the allies and made them all seem like potential enemies.

Even if people have an adequate conception of their welfare, they may be quite wrong about what really threatens it. The rebellion clearly insulted Athens, and Cleon got people to confuse insult with genuine risk. Some of these errors may be just a matter of getting the facts wrong; others may result from overestimation of some danger that is genuine, or the underestimation of other dangers (in this case, the danger of inspiring other defections from Athens by allies shocked at the

cruelty of her actions). People may also think themselves more vulnerable, and more helpless against the threat, than they really are.

Sometimes it seems that error is introduced by having too little fear. Athens made this error too, later, when it embarked on the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, refusing to heed sober advice. But what they should have heeded was not gusts or waves of fear, it was prudent calculation, facts, and evidence. And there's a good argument that even the grandiosity they exhibited in this rash act was an outgrowth of deeper fear. Lucretius says that wars of conquest are very often caused by a sense of powerlessness and basic vulnerability, which gives rise to the thought that if you extinguish all opposition, you will be safer. The rashness of the doomed expedition is not all that different from the rashness of murdering all the people of Mytilene—an unwise strategy of self-protection that takes the form of trying to eliminate all possible risks. It's not all that different from Proust's adult Marcel, who is driven mad with anxiety unless he pens Albertine up so that it is physically impossible for her to betray him.

FEAR'S LAWS: HEURISTICS AND BIASES

The new discipline of behavioral economics draws on psychological research to show us yet more about the errors of fear. Psychologists show that our assessments of risk are often inaccurate because, instead of soberly calculating costs and benefits, we use a number of heuristics that don't offer good

guidance in today's complicated world, well though they may have guided us in evolutionary prehistory.²⁶

One very common source of error in fear is what psychologists call "the availability heuristic": if a single type of problem is vivid in our experience, this leads us to overestimate the importance of the problem. This heuristic is a frequent problem in thought about environmental risks. People heard on the news that apples are contaminated by a dangerous pesticide, Alar—and this led many people to conclude, without further study, that the danger posed was huge. (The jury is still out on this one, but we certainly know by now that study, not panic, would have been the appropriate response. Alar remains classified as a probable carcinogen by the EPA, but the amount of the chemical that studies show potentially dangerous is extremely high, requiring an amount of Alar equal to that which one would ingest by drinking more than five thousand gallons of apple juice per day.) The availability heuristic also makes people fail to consider the full range of alternatives: for example, the fact that banning DDT will lead to an upsurge in deaths from malaria. In technical areas, there is no substitute for good and comprehensive scientific research, but the public often follows fear rather than science.

Another phenomenon that has been studied in the context of ethnic hostility is the "cascade": people respond to the behavior of other people by rushing to join them. Sometimes they join because of the reputation of those people—the "reputational

²⁶One excellent source for these heuristics is Cass R. Sunstein, *Risk and Reason: Safety, Law, and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), with further references to the psychological literature.

cascade"—and sometimes they join because they think that the behavior of others gives them new information—the "informational cascade." The economist Timur Kuran has argued that such cascades play a large role in the context of "ethnification," the shift (often amazingly rapid) in which people come to define themselves in terms of an ethnic or religious identity and to set themselves in opposition to some other ethnic group.²⁷ Psychoanalytic psychologist Sudhir Kakar, doing research on ethnic violence in India, independently arrives at a similar account.²⁸ Kakar's puzzle was why people who have lived together peacefully for years, Hindus and Muslims, suddenly turn hostile, defining their identity in a way they did not before, in terms of their religious ethnicity. His study shows that a large role is played by respected community leaders whose reputations produce unquestioning followers. A role is also played by the introduction of new "information" about danger allegedly posed by Muslims, often very unreliable.

Such tendencies threaten democracy in our nation today, as they have threatened India for many years. But there is a new development that makes things more volatile: social media and the Internet have made it easier for false reports to circulate and for cascades to develop. When a report "goes viral," emotions easily get out of control, in a way that is unlike the effect of newspaper reports, or even TV.

²⁷Timur Kuran, "Ethnic Norms and Their Transformation Through Reputational Cascades," *Journal of Legal Studies* 27 (1998), 623–659, and see Sunstein, 37–39.

²⁸Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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What is the antidote to damaging informational cascades? Correct facts, informed public debate, and, most important, a spirit of dissent and independence on the part of citizens. Fear, however, always threatens the spirit of dissent. Fear makes people run for cover, seeking comfort in the embrace of a leader or a homogeneous group. Questioning feels naked and solitary.

In famous experiments, psychologist Solomon Asch showed that people have a surprisingly high level of submissiveness to peer pressure, even when the peers are saying things that are obviously false, such as which of two lines is longer (where the right answer is obvious).²⁹ People rationalized going along with such errors by saying that they were afraid to speak up. We're now in a position to understand the deep psychological forces involved. But, Asch also found, if even one person before the experimental subject did speak up and give the correct answer, this freed the subject to answer correctly. Dissent produces mental freedom from fear.

I'll have much more to say about the spirit of dissent, and how we might cultivate it. But we can see already that for dissent to do its job, people have to be willing to stand alone without crippling fear. The achievement of the child who learns to "play alone in the presence of its mother" must be paralleled by that of the adult who learns to argue alone in the presence of powerful forces of conformity. Democracy needs to cultivate that willingness to take risks for the truth and for good ideals. Americans grow up on valuable images of political

²⁹Asch, "Opinions and Social Pressure" (1955), accessed at <https://www.panarchy.org/asch/social.pressure.1955.html>.

independence: Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Henry Fonda character in *12 Angry Men*—and those American revolutionaries themselves, risking death to create the country we live in.

FEAR OF MUSLIMS: RHETORIC AND HEURISTICS, A TALE OF TWO PRESIDENTS

All the errors we have studied play a part in the crescendo of fear of Muslims that is such a prominent part of our national moment. Americans fear many things: loss of health care, expensive health care, Trump and his supporters, economic hardship, the success of women and minorities, racially biased police violence. To some extent each of these fears is both rational and useful; each, however, can get out of hand and disable sound thinking and cooperation. The fear of Muslims is a good place to apply what we have learned, seeing how a kernel of rational fear (fear of terrorist violence by criminals motivated by an extremist Islam-linked ideology) can escalate into fears that are irrational and harmful, producing a climate of mistrust that threatens to disable cherished democratic values. Fear is often manipulated by rhetoric, used by leaders who inspire their audience with trust.

The phenomenon is large and multiform. Let me take just one example of the rhetorical exploitation of fear to show where dangers kick in: President Trump's speech in Poland on June 11, 2017.

Some context first: The baseline ignorance of most Americans about Islam is huge. Most have no idea of the difference

between Sunni and Shiite, and most have little sense of the national concentrations of Muslims in today's world: no idea, for example, that the two largest Muslim populations are in Indonesia and India, both thriving democracies. *Muslim* and *Arab* are often said, and thought, interchangeably. Nor are people aware, since few have read the Koran, that Islam at its inception was in essence a religion of equal respect, very much like Christianity—one reason why so many Indian Hindus from the lowest castes have converted to either one or the other. Americans have little sense of the different nations in which Muslims live, or of their histories and current struggles. Nor are they aware of differences of interpretation of the Koran, nor of the fact that the severe Wahhabi interpretation is popular today, to the extent that it is, largely because it has been supported by the rulers of Saudi Arabia, an American ally.

In this climate of ignorance, it is easy for all the mechanisms of fear I've identified to operate in a distorting way. First and most obviously, 9/11 and subsequent terrorist incidents involving Muslims become fertile ground for the "availability heuristic." These high-profile events blot out other sources of danger, stopping people from looking at such problems as easy access to guns without background checking, and leading them to support aggressive action in this one case, neglecting others, as if it were the best way to reduce vulnerability across the board.

A cousin of the availability heuristic that is always particularly damaging is a mental confusion between salience and proportional likelihood. We know this well in the area of race and criminal justice. If once African Americans get branded as criminals, on the basis of high-profile crimes committed

by African Americans, then people often make two highly unreliable inferences: first, that a large proportion of crimes are committed by African Americans, and, second, that a large proportion of African Americans are criminals. Of course, even if the first were true, the second cannot be inferred from the first, and yet the regularity with which white people clutch their handbags or cross the street on seeing an African American shows how widespread such inferences are. Where Muslims are concerned, it's clear that people move much too rapidly from salient terrorist incidents to an idea that most terrorist incidents are committed by Muslims, a claim that can't easily be studied well, since the definition of *terrorism* is so vague and disputed. And then, the far more serious mental error, they move from the idea that most terrorist acts are caused by Muslims to the conclusion that most Muslims are terrorists or potential terrorists, a claim that is both glaringly false and highly counterproductive, since one good way to get information about possible Islamic terrorist acts is to cultivate good relations with the local Muslim community.

Cascades, both reputational and informational, play a huge role in stoking these generalized fears. The Internet makes cascades easy. Just as cute cat videos harmlessly go viral, so damaging and misleading information spreads rapidly, often further boosted by the Internet reputation of some commentator or self-proclaimed authority.

Further feeding fear are likely innate neurological mechanisms. Just as we are apparently hardwired to fear the shape of the snake, so we seem to be hardwired to fear a person who is hidden, whose face cannot be seen. Horror movies know this

well. Just as Darth Vader is scary precisely because his human voice issues forth from a mask and a full-body covering, so to, to many Americans at least, Muslim women in full covering inspire fear, particularly when the face is covered. Although our deep respect for religious choices has kept the United States from following some European countries that have actually banned the burqa, there's no doubt that it does inspire many people with unease and vague alarm—even though in the US and Europe, there is virtually no evidence of terrorist acts committed by women, and even though deliberate terrorists such as the Boston Marathon bombers try hard to blend in: those two wore baseball caps and T-shirts and carried backpacks. It's notable, too, that people do not shrink from lots of other types of full-body and even facial covering, such as normal winter attire (long down coat, hat pulled down over the eyebrows, scarf over mouth and nose, opaque or reflecting sunglasses), or the uniforms of winter athletes, surgeons, dentists, people attending a costume party. (Indeed, the French law banning facial covering had to include a long list of exceptions, including reasons of "health," "sport," "profession," and "artistic and cultural events.")

Despite the clear evidence of unevenness and clannishness in American and European fears, an innate aversion to the covered face, *when combined with* our innate clannish aversion to anything strange and unfamiliar, makes many Americans shrink from Muslims in a way that people don't shrink from more familiar-looking members of groups some of whose members engage in violence. For example, people never shrank from people known to be Irish Catholics, or proposed to limit

Irish Catholic immigration—despite the fact that Northern Ireland's "troubles" have generated a very large number of terrorist acts, and that most of the money supporting IRA (Irish Republican Army) terrorism came from the US. Even in Britain, where most of the terrorist acts took place, people didn't generally shun the Irish (they understood that the Republic and Northern Ireland were totally different entities), nor did they generally shun Roman Catholics, although the IRA was a Catholic terrorist organization. Nor did anyone try to invoke the idea of a "clash of civilizations," which would have been absurd, given that all parties were white and Christian. In short, they followed the evidence and rarely succumbed to irresponsible fear—no doubt because all parties were white and Christian.

Above all, fear responds to rhetoric, as Aristotle knew long ago. And our two most recent Republican presidents have handled the job of public communication very differently. After 9/11, Americans were insistently told by President George W. Bush that we are not at war with Islam. "We are not at war with Islam," he famously said. And he didn't say it just once: he kept on repeating that message frequently, as one can see by reading the archive at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/ramadan/islam.html>. Some representative examples:

On December 5, 2002, at the Islamic Center of Washington, DC:

"Here in the United States our Muslim citizens are making many contributions in business, science and law, medicine and education, and in other fields. Muslim members of our Armed Forces and of my administration are serving their

fellow Americans with distinction, upholding our nation's ideals of liberty and justice in a world at peace."

On November 13, 2002, at a meeting with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan:

"Some of the comments that have been uttered about Islam do not reflect the sentiments of my government or the sentiments of most Americans. Islam, as practiced by the vast majority of people, is a peaceful religion, a religion that respects others. Ours is a country based upon tolerance and we welcome people of all faiths in America."

On November 20, 2002, at a press conference:

"Ours is a war not against a religion, not against the Muslim faith. But ours is a war against individuals who absolutely hate what America stands for . . ."

There's a lot more in this archive, and the very fact that President Bush kept such an archive is itself significant. For me, this is how a responsible leader reacts in the face of widespread popular fear. He calms escalating confusion and anxiety, leading people toward a more fact-based and pinpointed strategy, and reminding them of cherished American values that must not be sacrificed. (More questionable, admittedly, was the famous "Axis of Evil" speech of January 29, 2002, in which President Bush did demonize a group of nations thought to sponsor

terrorism: but at least the focus was on state-sponsored criminal activity rather than on the entirety of a religion, and indeed the inclusion of North Korea made it clear that he did not consider state-sponsored terrorism a peculiarly Islamic phenomenon.)

More generally, President Bush typically used the rhetoric of universal human dignity and progress, rather than the rhetoric of a clash of "civilizations." For example, he urged the US and Europe to "help men and women around the world to build lives of purpose and dignity," and to "protect the health of the world's people." This rhetoric was also valuable, calming inaccurate fear and getting people to focus narrowly on evidence of real danger, while engaging in constructive policies, helpful to human life around the world. (Such statements are of a piece with President Bush's insistence that the pharmaceutical companies provide anti-retroviral drugs at a reasonable price in Africa.)

President Trump, by contrast, both during his campaign and after it, has repeatedly alluded to Islam as if it were, as a whole, a source of danger. The rhetoric preceding the controversial travel ban singled out Muslims as potential enemies, often using the words *Muslim ban*. The speech he gave in Warsaw on July 6, 2017, which was widely praised, seems almost more ominous because more subtle. The speech asks whether "the West" still has the will to fight against an enemy that is portrayed as monolithic and evil. From a description of Poland's "fight . . . for freedom" against the Nazis (whom the speech oddly conflated with the Soviets, who were of course our

allies!), the speech segues rapidly to a current threat: "another oppressive ideology" that "seeks to export terrorism and extremism all around the globe." Although the threat is named "radical Islamic terrorism," not Islam as such, and although the president alludes to his request to "the leaders of more than fifty Muslim nations to join together to drive out this menace which threatens all of humanity," the speech nonetheless subscribes to the old familiar "clash of civilizations" idea. As Peter Beinart notes in *The Atlantic* on July 6, the speech refers ten times to "the West" and five times to "our civilization."³⁰ The thesis of Samuel Huntington to which this rhetoric alludes is that "the West" is at war with Islamic civilization as a whole.³¹

And what is "the West"? It is not a geographical entity, since it includes Australia and Poland and excludes nations such as Egypt and Morocco that are further west than some of the included nations. And, as Beinart notes, it is not a political or economic term either, since Japan, South Korea, and India are not included. Basically, it is an appeal to shared religion and shared racial identity: to Christianity (with some Jews included) and to whiteness (since Latin America does not appear to be included).

³⁰Peter Beinart, "The Racial and Religious Paranoia of Trump's Warsaw Speech," *The Atlantic*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/trump-speech-poland/532866/>.

³¹Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). One remarkable oddity of Huntington's view of history is that India is said to have a uniformly Hindu "civilization," and not even to be one of the "split" countries—ignoring the profound intermingling and interpenetration of Hinduism and Islam throughout long stretches of Indian history.

As political analysis, the speech makes no sense. The Islamic world is at war within itself, and there is no single organization or group, among the many mutually hostile groups, that has the power to threaten a military invasion of even the weakest European nation. The speech is not about analysis, however; it is about stoking fear of the "south" and "east," or, more precisely, of immigrants from those regions. Beinart's conclusion seems to me correct: in Trump's view, "America is at its core Western: meaning white and Christian (or at least Judeo-Christian). The implication is that anyone in the United States who is not white and Christian may not truly be American but rather an imposter and a threat."

The president's rhetoric, unlike the rhetoric of President Bush, creates a demon without directing attention to crucial facts. It stokes fear by creating a sense of a large and unbounded danger (the south, the east), and of imminence and urgency. It then segues into the rhetoric of blame and self-defense, as fear stokes anger. I'll follow this connection in my next chapter.

In short, fear of Muslims today draws on all the mechanisms of fear I have discussed: innate tendencies, deeply embedded psychological heuristics, and people's responsiveness to political rhetoric. This type of amorphous fear, generated in a climate of ignorance and fed by imprecise and alarmist rhetoric, is the enemy of any sane dialogue about our future. Fortunately, good analysts know how to dissent.

This is just one example of American fear gone awry. The same type of analysis should be carried out with other fears, too: What are people thinking and picturing? Why? How well focused is the fear, and how well supported with correct

information? To the extent that the fear is narrowly targeted, has one instance been overemphasized to the neglect of others equally serious? If a fear is well grounded and balanced, and yet there is a danger that people will ignore the problem and fail to act, some hype can be warranted, as when a politician trying to get citizens to evacuate calls an oncoming hurricane a "monster storm." But even well-grounded exaggeration should be indulged only with great caution.

THE FACILITATING ENVIRONMENT, PART II

We are vulnerable, and our lives are prone to fear. Even in times of happiness and success, fear nibbles around the edges of concern and reciprocity, turning us away from others and toward a narcissistic preoccupation with ourselves. Fear is monarchical, and democratic reciprocity a hard-won achievement.

Winnicott, optimistic despite taking the full measure of these dangers, thought that people could attain "mature interdependence" if they had a "facilitating environment," and he thought that this environment was often attained. Given his profession, his focus throughout his life was on attaining it in the individual child's life in the family. Many children already had such an environment; if they did not, one could be supplied by the patient work of the analyst. But his wartime work led him to speculate about the larger question: what would it be like for society as a whole to be a "facilitating environment" for the cultivation of its people and their human relationships?

Such a society, he thought (as the Cold War advanced) would have to be a freedom-protecting democracy, since only that form of society fully and equally nourished people's capacities to grow, play, act, and express themselves.³² He repeatedly connected democracy with psychic health: to live with others on terms of mutual interdependence and equality, people have to transcend the narcissism in which we all start life. We have to renounce the wish to enslave others, substituting concern, goodwill, and the acceptance of limits for infantile aggression.

We have a vague idea of what these goals mean in the family, and Winnicott always emphasized that a key job of government was to support families, though he said little about this in a practical way. We can certainly see, ourselves, that families cannot make children secure and balanced, capable of withstanding onslaughts of fear, if they are hungry, if they lack medical care, if children lack good schools and a safe neighborhood environment. This leads us to the larger question that Winnicott only vaguely addressed: how can a nation be, as a whole, a "facilitating environment" that allays fear and protects democratic reciprocity?

It's an urgent question, and the stakes are high. Because this is not a book of detailed public policy, I won't even attempt solutions to these problems here, although in chapter 7 I shall propose general strategies. For now, let's summarize the problem as it emerges from my analysis. Fear always simmers beneath the surface of moral concern, and it threatens to destabilize

³²See especially "Some Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word Democracy," in *The Family and Individual Development*.

democracy, since democracy requires all of us to limit our narcissism and embrace reciprocity. Right now, fear is running rampant in our nation: fear of declining living standards, fear of unemployment, of the absence of health care in time of need; fear of an end to the American Dream, in which you can be confident that hard work brings a decent and stable life and that your children will do better than you did if they, too, work hard.

Our narrative of fear tells us that some very bad things can easily happen. Citizens may become indifferent to truth and prefer the comfort of an insulating peer group who repeat one another's falsehoods. They may become afraid of speaking out, preferring the comfort of a leader who gives them a womb-like feeling of safety. And they may become aggressive against others, blaming them for the pain of fear. To this fear-blame dynamic we now turn.