

Managing Fear in an Age of Deep Division

(Crossing the Divide between Us and “Them”)

Tina Sipula was just 24 years old when she found herself facing an angry man with a gun. He had come to the door of the Catholic Worker House where she worked, looking for his girlfriend. The girlfriend had locked herself in the bathroom. Tina was alone. ▶



Connecting
Point



“I was in my first year at the Worker house,” she remembers, 30 years later. “I prayed to be empathetic. I decided I was going to crawl inside his heart and be with him. I said, ‘Tell me about you. What are you feeling?’ He broke down, crying. I told him, ‘Here’s what you can do to get help. Put the gun away.’”

It was the first but not only time Tina would encounter such violent men, often looking for the women who were fleeing them. Rather than letting her fear grow, Tina deepened her resolve to connect with their humanity. Dorothy Day – founder of the Worker House movement and mentor to Tina – had taught her young student how.

“She taught me how to see people’s souls,” Tina says. “She gave her whole being when she was with someone. Nothing distracted her from it. It was a sacred thing.”

Most of us will never encounter a man with a gun, and for the record, Tina did call the police after the would-be attacker left. But outsized fear is common to our culture today, as if we were under personal attack daily. And it promotes a strong desire to hide in the bathroom with those fearing the same thing. This propensity to seek shelter in and with our own tribe makes common enemies of the “other,” whether by belief, class, education or ethnicity.

Fear can lead to hate. And that can lead to unspeakable violence, whether on a personal level or as public policy. What’s needed is a practice of peace that acknowledges but is not motivated by fear. The Benedictine Sisters and Oblates share their wisdom on how to do that with tenderness, in order to move beyond fear, with open ears and softened heart.

Fear of The Other

Tina, today a Benedictine Oblate, had every reason to be terrified. No one would have blamed her for running away. After all,

mammals are made to react in the instant, thanks to a spike in adrenaline at the sound of a twig snapping behind us. That fight-or-flight response helps keep our bodies safe.

Yet many of us react with fear in circumstances far less threatening. Take, for instance, the ordinary act of nearing someone on the street who doesn’t look like us. Do we avert our eyes and hurry past? Do we cross to the other side? Or do we smile and make eye contact, wishing them a good day?

The radical hospitality young Tina brought to her encounter is rare, requiring a lifetime of dedicated practice for most to achieve. But most of our fears are unfounded, coming courtesy of overactive imaginations and misperceptions. As Harvard professor and author Steven Pinker asserts, Americans are safer now than ever before in human history. Why, then, are we so scared?

Our anxieties – stoked by a culture of fearmongering and tribalization – have become more extreme thanks to a phenomenon called “group polarization.” Social psychologists say it can happen when group think occurs, creating a group with more extreme views than those initially held by the members. ▶

Call it brain washing.

Jesus struggled against group think throughout his ministry, from his teachings on compassion to his examples of hospitality to strangers. He showed us how to respond to one another's humanity, no matter what our superficial differences.

Consider his foray into the foreign regions of Tyre and Sidon. There, a Syrophenician woman – a pagan! – asked him to heal her daughter. At first, he remonstrated, saying he was sent to minister to his own tribe. When she pleaded with him, though, he softened and did what she asked.

The formula, shared again and again throughout Holy Scripture, is this: Stop. Listen. Listen again. Listen deeply. Act.

Meet *The Other*

It's the best way to manage our fears, and to prevent them from managing us. Sister Susan Hutchens, OSB suggests we create opportunities to

intentionally meet people we might not otherwise encounter. By doing so, we can find ways to listen.

“Put yourself in a situation with those you feel are different from you,” she says. “Join an interfaith dialogue such as the Christian-Muslim-Jewish Women's Dialogue (an annual program sponsored by the Benedictines). Volunteer in a school or church. Volunteer at a hospital. Become part of something where you can learn that ‘the other’ is the same as you.”

She says we must be authentic in our interactions, though.

“Try striking up a real conversation,” she says. “We have to break down the barriers and put ourselves out there. Otherwise we won't get to know people as individuals.”

Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB agrees.

“We need to meet each person as a person of God,” she says. That's how she manages her own “irrational” – her word – fear of crowds.

“I find a quiet space to see the individuals rather than the large and faceless crowd,” she says. “It's easier to be afraid of a large group than one person. But if you can see the group as individuals and understand they are good people trying to live their lives as best they can, you can control that fear.” ▶



Letter from the Prioress

Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB

Fear it seems is all around. Hurricane, fire, flood, hatred, violence, illness, insecurity of all dimensions! Right now even normally nutritious romaine lettuce is dangerous.

How does a person stay open, trusting, and welcoming of life when faced with these realities? This is a big question ... and not a new one. Last week we prayed in Psalm 31, ‘fear is all around me ... I trust in the Lord; let me be glad and rejoice in your love.’ The psalm bounces back and forth between fear and trust.

As you read this issue of Connecting Point, may you grow in wisdom to manage this dance in your own life.

I pray for you this blessing, the closing line of Psalm 31: ‘Be strong, let your heart take courage, you who hope in God.’ Blessings and Peace!

Reconsider. Should you be afraid?

Whether our fears are considered trivial – of snakes and spiders, say – or profound – of a group of human beings – we suffer because of them. Examining the source of those fears through a more powerful lens can help us understand them, leading to a change of behavior and even heart. It's why Sr. Stefanie takes her preschoolers' fears so seriously.

"Young children are often afraid of thunder," she says by way of example. "If their fear is reinforced by their classmates' screams, and no adult addresses it, they might have that irrational reaction all their lives. But if we calmly explain it and then joke, 'Let's pretend thunder is the sound of God and St. Peter bowling in heaven,' we help create an expectation that thunder is natural and not threatening. We can walk to lunch without crying."

Whether fears are innate or learned, no one is born fearing other human beings. But when we learn to do that, the most unspeakable acts of our history can occur.

"People who live in fear cannot be at peace," Sister Marlene Miller, OSB says. "How many times in Scripture does Jesus say, Be not afraid or Fear not? Fear can be insidious and pervasive. It can be dangerous."

It can subvert our ability to know right from wrong.

"We all have fears," Sister Marianne Burkhard, OSB says. "But they can paralyze us. When you see people being against another group of people, you realize their fear comes from insecurity."

That insecurity can create so much "head noise" that we can no longer hear the still, small voice.

Fear on the Rise

An annual survey on American fear conducted by Chapman University shows that Americans are becoming more afraid, particularly of things they cannot directly control, such as terrorism and illness. The perceived threats may exist, but their power to

harm us sometime in the future remains a function of uncontrollable circumstances.

It's like worrying about when a meteor will hit the earth.

"I see fears as responses to uncertainty," Chapman sociology professor and survey author Christopher Bader says. To cope, he says, we sometimes assign blame by way of a conspiracy theory. "A conspiracy theory brings order to a disordered universe. ▶"



Benedictine Oblate Carolyn Gray, left, joins Sister Catherine Cleary, OSB for the annual Oblate Retreat Day.



Sister Susan Hutchens, OSB



It's saying that the problems aren't random, but they're being controlled by a villainous group."*

Enemies are clear when we are surrounded by tigers. But when our fear is stoked over the possibility of a terrorist attack from someone, somewhere, some time, villains remain indistinct and unidentifiable. Either way, stress hormones are released. The trouble is, the hormones don't dissipate as we continue to contemplate the threat we cannot control. And they can make us sick.

Chronic stress can produce many symptoms, from headache to stomach ache. It can hike our anxiety and depression. It can affect our interaction with others, causing us to lash out, withdraw and even villainize groups outside our own tribe. It's a common phenomenon right now. A real rather than perceived threat to our health and well being.

Sr. Marlene suggests we turn off our screens and do something positive rather than negative.

"We tend to listen to those we agree with," she says. "Try turning off those voices, at least occasionally. Take a news break. Do something good for other people.

"The opposite of fear is faith, that with the help of God – and our own cooperation – we will be fine."

How to Cooperate

No matter what our fears, taking a positive step will help us manage them. Benedictine Oblate Chris Kraft says she has taken a positive step to respond to her fear of a growing climate of intolerance. She is helping a single mom from the Congo.

"I'm helping her learn English," Chris says. "She told me soldiers came and took everything. While in a refugee camp, she gave birth to a child with cerebral palsy. They wouldn't give her food for the child, saying it was not worth it. The mom found a way to get food. She's such an inspiration to me. She's helped me get a handle on my fear."

Sister Ruth Ksycki, OSB says fear can teach us how to love ourselves and others, if we are open to it. ▶





Benedictine Oblate Chris Kraft, left, laughs with Sister Michaela Hedican, OSB, presenter for the annual Oblate Retreat Day.

“I used to have a fear of not doing something perfectly,” she says. “It took me a long time to realize everything doesn’t have to be 100 percent perfect. Maybe it can be 80 percent or 70 percent perfect. We need to be conscious of our fear to gain wisdom from it.”

Sister Lynn Levo, CSJ asks, in the Summer 2018 issue of LCWR’s Occasional Papers, “Can we see that ‘conscious fear is potentially revolutionary,’ challenging us to find new ways to cooperate and collaborate ... to help create a world that works?”

It can be an uphill battle to admit to fear in a culture that views the emotion as weak. But Levo says it’s worth it.

“While attending to fear we discover what fear is asking of us, and how fear is calling us to act with courage and loving kindness toward ourselves and others,” she writes. “By courageously sharing our fear and vulnerability, we extend compassion to ourselves and others.”

Fear Not!

To be clear, it’s not the fear itself that is fundamentally good or bad. What matters is how we manage and use our fear. When we get stuck in it – unable to see or hear more than our own tribe’s rhetoric – we cannot grow as children of God.

Opportunities to transform our fear into something good happen every day of our lives. Sister Catherine Cleary, OSB recounts an experience from high school that helped her realize this. It happened one evening as she returned home from a party to find her father waiting up for her. She was horrified.

“It’s not that I thought he would be angry, but that I feared letting him down,” she says. “We might all have this kind of fear. We

don’t want to imply that someone else is insignificant to us. We want to show our esteem by remembering and honoring our commitments.”

In other words, we are called to not remain rigidly fearful but to identify, listen to and transform what frightens us into goodness.

Which is at the heart of the biblical injunction to have “fear of the Lord.” The fear that we will not live up to God’s vision, that we will fail to be who we are created to be, can be very motivating. It’s so important that St. Benedict included it in the Holy Rule.

“The first degree of humility is to keep the fear of God always before your eyes,” Sr. Catherine notes. “It doesn’t mean we are to be scared. Fear of the Lord is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It’s a gift to help us become who we’re meant to be.”

It helps us – through attention and intention – to live in in wonder, awe and gratitude.

“Awe of the Lord is an Oh My God moment,” Sr. Ruth says. ▶

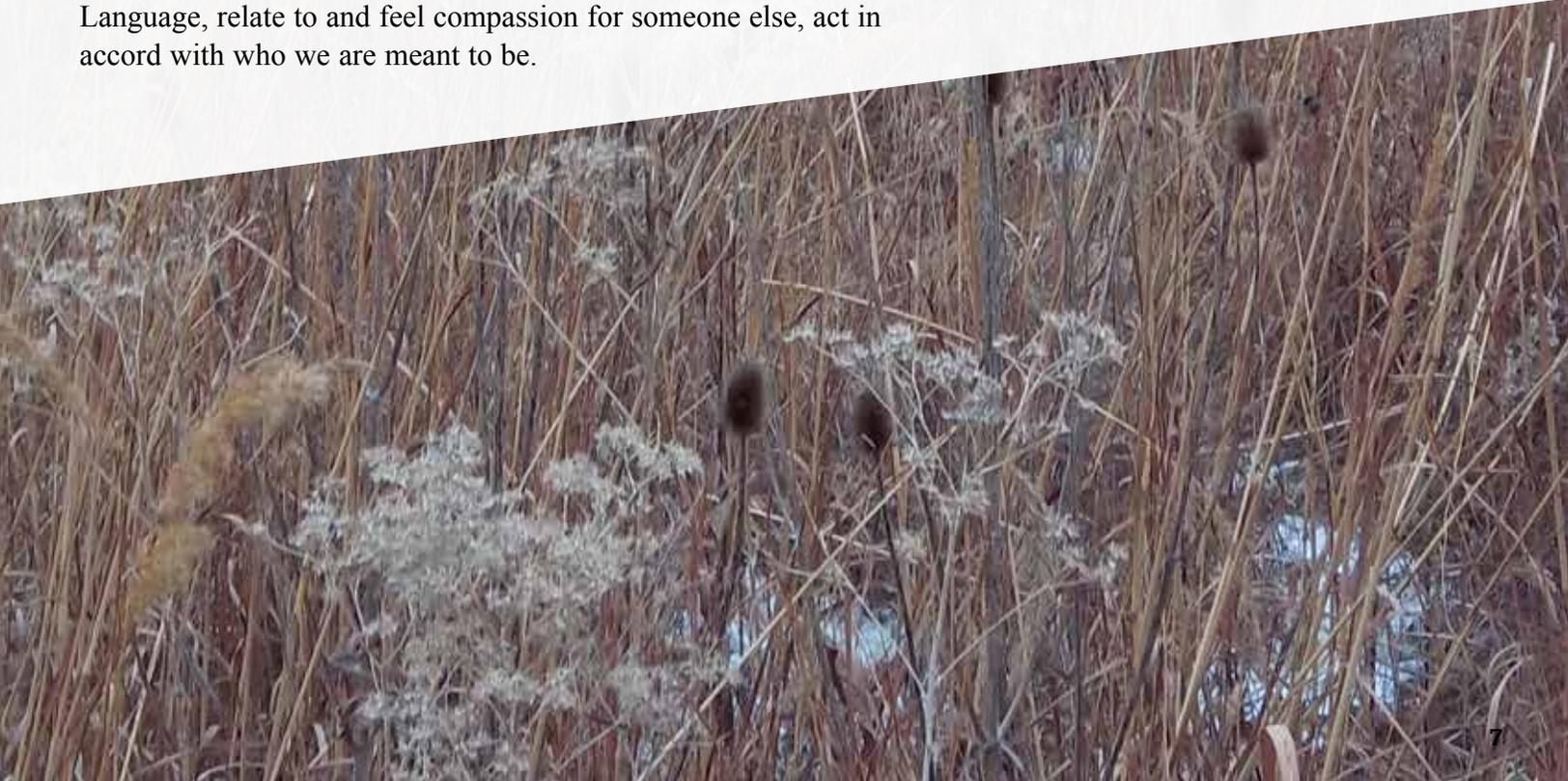


“It’s something that takes your breath away, like a sunset. Recently, I had the experience watching a man who came into a Burger King with a woman who was disabled. He helped her into a chair and went to the counter to order and came back with the food. He spread the napkin, placed the fork and knife and put her food down before he took his own seat. It was so touching.”

A Final Thought

Fear – not irrational fear, but understandable fear – can be a guiding force that impels us to do the right thing: teach English as a Second Language, relate to and feel compassion for someone else, act in accord with who we are meant to be.

We have the tools we need to manage our fears, and they all begin with God. By spending time in prayer with God, we invite new hope and joy into our hearts. We gain the courage to see things a new way. We cross the divide between us and them.



One Benedictine Sister's Immigration Story

Clare Muschalek was grateful for a lot of things. The tiny fir tree hung with red apples and white candles. The beautiful dolls she now held in her hands, a gift from her aunt who lived in America. Her family.

It was Christmas Eve, 1923. Her mother had served a supper of brown bread spread with goose lard and "ersatz marmalade." Dessert was made from inexpensive day-old crumbs set aside for poor families, but you couldn't hardly tell. It was delicious.

Clare's father had gone missing during World War I seven years ago, when she was just a year old. It was impossible for a fatherless family to survive in post-war Germany back then. If it hadn't been for Clare's aunt sending food, supplies and clothing from America, who knows what would have become of them.

Clare's mother read her sister's Christmas letter aloud to the two children. "Since things are getting worse for you over there, why don't you come to America? Let me know right away if I should send you the money."

The trip from Germany to Chicago took 22 sometimes-harrowing days. Clare – who wrote about it years later – remembers first seeing the Statue of Liberty and joining her 8-year-old voice with the rest of the immigrants as they shouted, "Hurrah for America!"

Sister Clare gained American citizenship, joining the Benedictine community in 1931. Always a prolific writer, she documented much about her family and community life over the years. Her deep wisdom is reflected in the poem we share here.

Persons are Gifts!

PERSONS ARE GIFTS:

Some are lovely; others plain.
Some bring pleasure; others, pain.
BUT ALL ARE GIFTS!

PERSONS ARE GIFTS:

Some are vivid; others pale;
Some mishandled in the mail.
BUT ALL ARE GIFTS!

PERSONS ARE GIFTS:

Some are easy to unwrap;
Some resist me with a snap!
They've been hurt; they are afraid.
Help me, Lord, to give them aid.
BECAUSE THEY'RE GIFTS!

I'm a person, I'M A GIFT!

I will set myself adrift
in my heavenly Father's Love
Who smiles on me from above.

THANKS, GOD, FOR GIFTS!

- Sister Clare Muschalek, OSB
(1914 - 1989)





Sisters Catherine Cleary, Marlene Miller, Helen Carey and Mary Core enjoyed the Hope and Harmony dinner in support of St. Joseph the Worker House in Rock Island.

Community News

- Sister Bobbi Bussan was able to meet Pope Francis during the 2018 CIB Symposium in Rome for which she served as coordinator Sept. 6-13.
 - Benedictine Sisters attended a range of meetings this autumn, including the 2018 Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly, the National Religious Vocation Conference Convocation and the Subprioress-House Coordinator Meeting. Sister Ruth Ksyski joined Benedictine Oblates who attended the Oblate Regional Meeting.
 - Benedictine Sisters join the wider community in supporting social justice initiatives with such organizations as the Quad Cities Sanctuary Coalition, World Relief, and Quad Cities Interfaith. Activities have included prayer vigils, fundraisers and presentations.
- * The fall has been busy with cultural and educational opportunities, including an intercongregational gathering in Wisconsin, a presentation by Sister Ilia Delio, and a performance by Quad City Flutes Unlimited in our chapel.

Winter 2019 at Benet House Retreat Center:

For the full list of upcoming retreats, visit smmsisters.org/retreats.

Silent Directed Retreat – Usher in your new year with three days for yourself.

Creation and the Cross – Join Sister Sandra Brunenn for a six-week conversation about Elizabeth Johnson’s new book.

Sacred Yoga – Discover deeper meaning in your yoga practice.

Compassion to Self Retreat – Explore self-care as the first step to bringing compassion to the world.

Valentine Evening for Couples – Always a lovely evening!

Mandala Retreat Day – No experience necessary to join us for this contemplative practice.

Spiritual Practices for Depression – Gain tools to help hold a weary heart.

Compassion to Others Retreat – Explore ways to bring gentleness to others in a sometimes fractious world.

Working with the Sacred Medicine Wheel – Learn about this gentle and effective practice.



SMA News

The Class of 1962, above, enjoyed their reunion at Benet House July 20-22, 2018. Standing left to right: Sister Judith Ann Croegaert, Liz Goeke, Nancy Kelly Platt, Pat Pearson Forsythe, Carol Morris Fisher, Mary Anne Schreck Liggett, and Mary Meegan Brinckerhoff. Seated left to right: Mary Jane Miller Murphy, Sylvia(Steve) Staszak Drucker, Rosemary Carol Ellinger, Peg Hemp Callahan, Veronica Hecks Minnaert.



The Class of 1964, left, enjoyed their reunion at Benet House Aug. 17-19, 2018. Standing left to right: Kathy Houlihan Kenney, Carm Magsamen Walsh, Kate Kuhlman Murray. Seated left to right: Margie Treat McKenzie, Mary Ann Beckman Murphy, Pat Brennan Gruber.



The Class of 1973, above, celebrated their 45th anniversary together at Benet House Oct. 12 - 14, 2018. Standing left to right: Mary Beth McKinney, Cindy Gera Howard, Toni Leniz Turner. Seated left to right: Valerie Greer Weeks, Ellen Wangler Staples, Linda McEntee Fasching, Maggie Foresman Kindig.

LISTEN WITH THE EAR OF YOUR HEART

ST. BENEDICT

The Class of 1965 meets each October at Starved Rock State Park for a day of friendship and remembering. Here are the Belles of St. Mary's from October, 2018. Front row l-r: Peggy Weber Siegfried, Joy Schierer here from FL, Paulette Hansen Fisher, Dianne Wood Adkisson, Marie McHarry, Linda Sullivan Owens. Back row l-r: Diana Cathelyn Dilitkanich, Sue Stickelmaier Schierer, Mary Ellen Yehl Taets here from TN, Shirley Pecharich McElvain, Andrea Abrams Corbett, Mary Croegaert Buysse, Barb Glueckert Bryzgalski.



In Memoriam ...

Paula Romanelli Brown, '64 died June 18, 2017

Mother of **Kathleen Mulligan Bailey, '74** died Nov. 16, 2018

Mother of **Megan Kilcullin, '82** died Aug. 15, 2018

Barbara Schimenz Peckham, '51 died Sept. 4, 2018

Patricia Kennedy, '45 (former Sister Mary Peter) died Sept. 21, 2018

Reunion Announcements

Class of 1975 | Oct. 4-6, 2019

Attention Alums:

Reserve your space at Benet House as early as possible to improve your chance of securing space for your next reunion. We fill up years in advance!



Sisters of St. Benedict

St. Mary Monastery
2200 88th Avenue West
Rock Island, IL 61201-7649
309-283-2100 • 309-283-2200 FAX
www.smmsisters.org

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #59
Rock Island, IL

Return Service Requested



Connecting Point

Autumn/Winter 2018/2019

*Published three times a year by the
Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery,
Rock Island, IL 61201*

Phone: 309-283-2100

Fax: 309-283-2200

Editor

Susan Flansburg

benedictines@smmsisters.org

www.smmsisters.org