

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

23. The Cardboard Box Syndrome

21 August 2014

Gandhi said that fearlessness is the first step toward a spiritual life. While the world is a frightening place, I do not feel afraid. I like to think I am neither stupid nor foolhardy. I will take ordinary precautions to guard myself against injury. I do not walk in dangerous places, whether in the city or the country, after dark, especially if I can accomplish my task in the daytime. I take my medicine as prescribed and try to remain as fit as I can be without joining a gym. But I do not take extra-ordinary precautions. They become limiting without making one any safer, and they play into fear. I trust that things will be all right. I have chosen to leave fear for those moments of genuine peril when the body reacts according to its age-old script of increased heart rate and an inflow of adrenalin. I am simply unable to react with fear, even the low-level variety, to future situations that may or may not occur. That is just too nebulous an outcome to get excited about.

I faced my ongoing stroke with a singleness of purpose to get back to the house without falling. I was not afraid, though I am not sure why I was not. The stroke, which left my left side completely paralyzed, was rehearsed in earlier fears of being incarcerated, of being enclosed in the flesh in a body that no longer did my bidding. I saw the effects of stroke and paralysis in others, and this became my greatest fear of disability. Having confronted this fear many times and many years ago, apparently I saw no value in repeating it. The worst moment had arrived and I was now in a state of quickly developing paralysis. There was simply no point in being afraid of what I could no longer change. The best course, it seemed to me, was to accept the fact and see what I could do next. Denying the truth, or pretending it is something else, fixes nothing.

I often wish I could ease other peoples' minds, especially my friends', when they are beset by fear. All fears are irrational: they either deal with what has already happened and so are unchangeable, or, more often, they deal with the future and so are unknowable. They are all phantoms. When one is in a dangerous situation there need be no fear, either, for the heightened senses and other physical reactions are then on auto-pilot and guide us. They are preparations for dealing with the danger. There is no fear in the here-and-now either.

Fear does not respond to reason and each spawns still others. Lay one to rest and two more take its place. It is an interminable losing game of Whac-a-Mole and it is better never to begin it. I prefer to deal with my own fears by indulging them and letting them have free rein for ten minutes, allowing them to run amok and tumble towards their logical or, rather, illogical, conclusions. I call this the "Cardboard Box Syndrome." It begins like this: I have failed to do a simple task my boss sets before me. Though normally easy-going, this time he will fire me. Within a month I will be broke and unable to pay the rent. The landlord will evict me and I will be hungry and out on the street with only the clothes I am wearing and living in a cardboard box

at the curb. Perhaps, I tell myself, I should leave work early before I make any more mistakes and go scouting for that cardboard box now. Maybe I will be lucky and find a sturdy refrigerator carton.

It is the absurdity of letting my mind run off the rails that allows me to defuse the fear before it really takes hold of me. Meanwhile, the boss has completely forgotten he even asked me to do anything. No one's the wiser, thankfully, except I.