

Fear factor: Psalm 27:1-14

by [Peter L. Steinke](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

I was at a class reunion with several former classmates when one of them, a professor of philosophy, asked an unusual question: “What fears have you conquered over the years and what new ones have you acquired?” Not eager to make our private fears public, each of us waited for someone else to open up the discourse. One person finally listed some familiar fears, including “mice,” “being left out or abandoned” and “the dark.” Two confessed to being lifelong phobics, one claustrophobic (afraid of enclosed spaces) and one arachnophobic (afraid of spiders). Our newer fears were more age-specific—“being doped and sitting aimlessly in a stupor in a nursing home,” “dying, I just don’t like the thought of it” and “a recurrence of my cancer.”

I thought about Paul Tillich’s three dimensions of anxiety, and how the eight of us had covered all three in our revelations. Human beings, Tillich noted, must confront the anxiety of nonbeing (death), the anxiety of meaninglessness and the anxiety of fate (unpredictability, uncertainty). I know that technically fear and anxiety are distinct from each other and are even believed to travel along different neurological circuits in the brain. Fear has an object; anxiety is free-floating, a kind of generic dread. But they are close relatives, both warning us of threats to life.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; what shall I fear?” the psalmist asks. “The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” These verses are two of the more than 300 references to fear in the Old and New Testaments. A wide range of emotions are captured in the Hebrew and Greek words for *fear*, from a sense of awe and immense respect to heart-pounding fright. In the context of Psalm 27, the inducers of fear are identified as slanderers, adversaries, breathers of violence, and betraying relatives. To respond to their threats, the psalmist doesn’t appeal to a simplistic platitude, such as “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” He refuses to make light of the impending danger by urging everyone who is afraid to “make lemonade out of lemons,” or suggesting that one project an image of having “the right stuff.” If there is to be any encouragement, it is to come from outside of the fearful soul. Confident that the Lord is his light, salvation and stronghold, the

psalmist asserts:

For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent,  
he will set me high on a rock. (Ps. 27:5)

No matter how severe the circumstances, they are not able to shake his confidence in God. He has known God's faithfulness.

Fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger; it puts us on high alert. Yet it can also do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness. Neuroscience links fear to the amygdala in the lower, primitive brain. This small structure scouts for trouble and in detecting it, sounds an alarm and jerks multiple neural cords. As it reacts quickly to the threat, it ignores fine distinctions and uses generalizations. Its strength is rapid processing, and its weakness is lack of precision. With extreme fear, noradrenaline flushes through the body, initially producing intense vigilance, but then flooding the brain and riveting attention on the object of fear. Now the fearful person can hardly shift attention elsewhere. Tunnel vision occurs. Fear takes over, overwhelming the imaginative capacities and advanced reasoning. The fearful one becomes locked into the present and loses the ability to envision something other than what is now threatening. Reality is pruned to the senses, to the synapses mediating fear, to the paralyzing moment.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel claimed that the role of the prophet is "to cast out fear." The psalmist does this using poetry in the service of prophecy, showing a way to parlay fear into energy, to transmute danger into possibility and to switch power from the scary present to the things that might be. "I believe," the psalmist exclaims, "that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Even though present conditions appear to deny God's goodness, he trusts that which is not seen and which escapes sense experience. God will be faithful—"the Lord will take me up." This assurance is the heart of the gospel. God will not let his promises return empty. In Christ all things will become new.

When we are of a fearful heart, we forget the plot of the story. God is not only the author of all things, the God of Genesis, the Mother of all creation, the beginning Source but also the God of promise, of the things that will be, of new creation, of the future, of tomorrow. God is the Alpha and Omega.

Moving from the vision of the moment to a wider view of the future with firm confidence in the Lord, the psalmist says:

Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
Yea, wait for the Lord! (Ps. 27:14)

Through the centuries, these and other words of the Psalter have been a reservoir of refreshment for those bowed down by the limits of life. The psalms are regularly recited in Christian worship, and for good reason. According to studies associated with brain imaging, the amygdala responds powerfully to calm words, gentle touch, and faces. All lower the activity of the amygdala. Human presence and voice are resources for “new creation.” Let us say to those of fearful heart, the Lord “will come and save you” (Isa. 35:4). Take courage. God is a God of the things that will be.