

BATS AND THE BOMB

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Imagine that you are in a part of town corrupted by years of neglect. It is dark; NOT the living and rich darkness of human skin, nor of cool shade after too much light. This is where poverty, lack of education, hunger, drug craving, ugliness and fear have shrouded lives. What light there is only makes the shadows deeper, and more threatening. You glimpse a rat so big it could eat a housecat for dinner and still be hungry. Its eyes glimmer in the feeble light, giving it an otherworldly, angry look. Then young men slide from the darkness behind leafless trees and a broken car. You see weapons in their hands. Trapped, threatened, your irises expand, and your bowels tighten. Adrenaline rushes through your body, the key chemical ingredient of fear. Then a shadow, darker than darkness, rises up like a giant bat. A cape, or is it a wing, swiftly sweeps one of your attackers from existence. The others turn in dismay and scatter into the night. There he is: Batman! Straight out of comic books and movies, he stands above the body of a fallen foe and smiles, kindly. He tells how to find your way home and says "I will be watching out for you." It is a hopeful, encouraging image.

There is much to be afraid of in life. For some of us it is rare to be afraid, others enjoy scary movies and dangerous situations, while others are more sensitive and feel burdened by constant anxiety: worry shadows all our days. The real problem is not in life's external threats, but in how aware each person is about the sources of fear. Everyone is exposed to the same germs and likelihood of crime or accident, but some worry about them more than others. Often people who are very afraid have other assumptions running underneath their thinking: that the universe is out to get them; or they are not worthy of the good things that happen; or they are more alone than others. Yet, no matter who we are, anyone can be lured into worrying about the hurt and destruction and ruin that surround us. Mark Twain emphasized this when he said, "I ...have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

Despite exaggeration, the fact remains that individual human beings are rather vulnerable. The human body is fragile, and above us all larger threats swirl like a thousand bats. Nuclear destruction lurks in hidden places. We know this even though we have never seen a bomb, nor witnessed an explosion outside of movies. Likewise words and images of environmental collapse echo in the news, giving every big storm an ominous twist. Furthermore, throughout the world there is a growing economic misery, a divide between those who have much

and those who have nothing. Between them arises fear and anger. So it is reasonable, in such a world, to be afraid.

But I don't want to encourage you to be afraid. I don't want you to be controlled by fear; I want you to be stronger than it. Nor do I want you to deny fear. I want you to see clearly the source of fear and then align yourself with something more powerful than it is. In the real world there can't be superheroes like Batman; instead, it might be something within you, it might be in human community, and it might be in the fabric of the universe itself. Ignorance is bliss and knowledge, without understanding, is frightening. The beginning of the spiritual journey is to face the evil in the world and to grow in understanding of its reality and source.

Batman Begins, to be certain is not a great movie but it does have some great words and images. In the movie Bruce Wayne says, "People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy and I can't do that as Bruce Wayne, as a man I'm flesh and blood I can be ignored I can be destroyed but as a symbol, as a symbol I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting. Alfred asks, "What symbol?" and Bruce Replies, "Something elemental, something terrifying."

In this movie 'fear' is the central theme. It runs through the movie, from the villain who uses a spray to accelerate people's fears, to Bruce Wayne who faces his fears and gains power from them. As a boy he had two fearful experiences. At age eight he fell down a well that opened into a cave of bats. Alone, hurt and afraid, he cried out and woke the bats who swarmed around him, a cloud of terror rising up into the sky above. Then, not much later, he saw his parents killed by a petty thief. These two things naturally unnerved him. Fortunately he still had millions of dollars, but those did not help him with fear. As the movie opens Bruce Wayne has been wallowing in despair, alone and in pain for quite some time. He has seen noble people murdered, he has seen the corruption, poverty and evil of the world, and he has felt powerless in the face of it all.

At one point in the movie he meets a gangster, Carmine Falcone. The big man scoffs when Bruce comes to talk to him about the murder of a thief, Bruce says, "...not everyone in Gotham is afraid of you." Falcone says, "Only those who don't know me [do not fear me], kid. Look around you. You'll see two councilmen, a union official, a couple of off-duty cops, and a judge," implying that these are people who understand and have been corrupted by his frightening power. He says, "This is a world you'll never understand. And you always fear what you don't understand... Ignorance is bliss, my friend. Don't burden yourself with the secrets of scary people." Politics has to do with distributing power and making policy but keeps our minds focused on a narrow view of the world. Take for example the phrase "politics

of fear.” This is a term that has been used by many political liberals lately to attack the current administration. But do not be fooled into thinking that liberals are above using fear to manipulate people and drive their agenda. Threats of American Fascism, stories of elders dying without medical care, and coat hangers at pro-choice protests are all images of the politics of fear. I want this church, like all good religious communities, to call people towards a larger unity, to help liberate one another from paralyzing fear and worry.

Johanna Macy wrote about how to transform our fear for the world into power through her book *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*. Written in 1983, long before Americans thought much about terrorists outside of Israel or Belfast, long before fear of global economic collapse, when the Cold-War still gripped the world, it remains a deeply insightful and timely book:

“The present condition and future prospects of our world engender natural, normal and widespread feelings of distress. Yet, because [of our] fear of pain, [our] social taboos against expressions of despair, and other reasons..., these feelings are largely repressed. This repression tends to paralyze; it builds a sense of isolation and powerlessness...”

I would also point out that it also can make us aggressive, willing to strike out in fear. Ms. Macy points out that it is not merely information that leads us to gain our power back. She notes that some who look about and see our moral paralysis and try “to arouse the public to action by delivering every more terrifying facts and figures. [But] Information *by itself* can increase resistance, deepening the sense of apathy and powerlessness.” We may fear losing our money and falling into poverty, we fear cancer, or being unloved, fear of pain; fear of appearing morbid; fear of appearing stupid; fear of appearing too emotional; fear of feeling guilty; fear of sowing panic; fear of appearing unpatriotic; fear of seeming wakened by doubt; fear of being out of control: these drive us to silence and denial.

Yet, the amazing paradox in Ms. Macy’s work was when she got people together to share their fears, their fears lessened. The more that people spoke with each other about their powerlessness, the less alone and powerless they felt. Being afraid is about being powerless in the face of danger. Facing fears is part of seeking your power.

Facing fear means: if you fear bats, move in with them; if you fear heights, spend time looking out of high places. This doesn’t work with everything; for if you fear atomic war then you don’t want to go out and start one to stop fearing it. When I lived in Indiana I was always impressed with Senator Richard Lugar who spent much of his career using his knowledge of nuclear weapons to do something about ending

them. Likewise, getting cancer isn't the healthiest way to cure your fear of it, but looking at cancer directly, getting information about how to face it, how your chances increase, and how to prevent it, that can do you a lot of good.

What makes the difference for Batman in the movie is that he finds a guide, played by Liam Neeson. In the earlier Batman comics and books Bruce Wayne draws guidance from a source that is vaguely Christian, perhaps Episcopalian. But in recent decades Asia appears as the source of Mystical powers. So it is in some place like Tibet where he meets Henri Ducard who tells him, "To manipulate fears of others, you must first master your own." When Bruce Wayne says he is not ready his teacher kicks him and enters a martial arts stance while barking, "Death does not wait for you to get ready!" Later he explains, "You traveled the world... Now you must journey inwards, to what you really fear... it's inside you... there is no turning back."

This journey had begun years ago. There is a fine scene included in the movie. After the incident with the well as a young boy, Bruce awoke from a nightmare and his father, Thomas Wayne, was there to comfort him. "Bats again?" he asks. Bruce nods yes. His dad replies, "You know why they attacked you, don't you? They were afraid of you." Eight year old Bruce says, "Afraid of me?" Thomas Wayne: "Yeah, all creatures feel fear." Young Bruce is surprised, "Even the scary ones?" Thomas Wayne responds, "Especially the scary ones." So human beings try to be threatening when they are afraid of appearing weak, or when they want to play on the weakness of others. Later, as Bruce takes on the image of Batman, his servant Alfred asks him: "Why bats, sir?" Bruce replies: "Bats frighten me. It's time my enemies share my dread."

The second step in overcoming fears is to learn what is more powerful than what you fear and align your self with that power. This is especially useful if the fear comes from your own mind, such as worry over what you don't understand or can't control. For example, a little boy was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom. The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark." The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protect you." The little boy looked out the door and asked, "Are you sure?" The mother nodded, "Yes, I'm sure. He is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him," she said. The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and opened it a little. Peering out into the dark, he called, "Jesus? Since you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"

Our fear of other people, especially the aggressive and power hungry, is the root of war and bomb making. Jonah Blank, a young writer who traveled to India and wrote *Arrow of a Blue Skinned God*, noted, "Psychologists might say that demons are merely the personification of all we fear, our haziest terrors all rolled into an easily identifiable form. Undoubtedly true, but perhaps they are something else as well. Perhaps when demons were born they were the enemy race just over hill." Once we understand they are people, and to them we may appear as demons, we then begin to understand how to eliminate all demons, by making friends with others. Thus Batman is always trying to temper his violence; he uses no guns, and makes many friends. First it is his servant, Alfred, and Police Commissioner Gordon, and then it is Robin, and even enemies like Cat Girl. So it is that community grows. For me, the Beloved Community is the living form, the incarnation, of the greatest power we know.

One great prophet of true community was Jesus. Not surprisingly the most common command he gives his listeners through the Christian Gospels is to "be not afraid". Over and over he says, "Do not worry." For example, in Matthew out on the lake "when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And in the Gospel of John 14:27 Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

This line runs through Christian scriptures to that radical passage in John's 1st letter, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment." He wrote that, the person "who fears is not perfected in love." Here is a root of the phrase "No Fear" that appeared on many t-shirts a few years back: "Perfect love casts out all fear." Certainly the ancient command is to "fear the Lord." But to fear God is merely to fear the consequences of doing wrong. Christian Love of God, or Humanist ideal human love in human community, this is the root. The more secure a person is then the less fearful one is about loss. Know the truth and it shall free you from fear.

In *Batman Begins* Alfred asks Bruce, "Are you coming back to Gotham for long, sir?" and he replies, "As long as it takes [to] show the people... that their city doesn't belong to the criminals and the corrupt." So may we stand together, facing evil, for long as it takes to create beloved community and cast off fear of bats and bombs.