

## “Beyond Homeland Security”

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I remember where I was the day I felt my first real earthquake.  
It was just a few weeks ago;  
you probably remember it too.  
Just after dinnertime, I think;  
I was in the kitchen washing dishes when the whole house jolted,  
*boom, boom*, back and forth,  
and then quiet.  
I didn't realize what had happened at first.  
I thought maybe our cat had jumped off the balcony railing  
and landed hard—  
no, there he was, skulking against the wall  
and looking as freaked out as I felt.  
I looked outside—had a giant bird crashed into the window?  
No, that was ridiculous.  
It dawned on me then: *I think that was an earthquake.*

We don't have those in the Midwest where I grew up.  
Tornadoes, sure, but those are familiar.  
Earthquakes were a new thing.  
I didn't like it.  
No warning and our house was jerked back and forth  
by the ground it stood on!  
No damage, either, nobody hurt,  
but in my mind something had changed.  
My safe, solid house was no longer perfectly safe.  
The earth itself was no longer stable, secure, *grounded*.

I'll tell you, I know all about plate tectonics;  
I know with my brain that the earth isn't really stable;

those plates are moving, slowly,  
but moving along the fault lines and fissures.  
I know we're near one of those places.  
I know earthquakes happen here.  
But there is a *big* difference between knowing it intellectually  
and feeling the floor jerk underneath you out of nowhere.

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Six years ago the planes crashed into the Twin Towers  
like giant fiery birds  
and our world changed.  
We had not been attacked on our own soil  
since Pearl Harbor, sixty years ago.  
On that day our sense of security was profoundly shaken.  
We were no longer the chosen ones,  
safe from harm on our island continent  
while other lands bore the burden of bombs and trenches and battles.  
We had felt safe without even realizing it.  
Most of us don't value our health until we get sick.  
And likewise, we don't realize how good it is to be free from fear  
until we are seized by fear and held rigid in its grip.  
Those first few days after 9/11,  
I flinched every time a plane went by overhead.  
You all remember how it was.

You remember the political rhetoric of that time.  
We moved so quickly from shock and fear and sorrow  
to anger, a relentless anger that sought a target  
to kill and destroy and blot out  
so that we could feel safe again.  
Our security had been violated,  
and our leaders could not tolerate what that felt like.  
They declared a war on terror.  
Many people have pointed out the absurdity of this phrase.

How can you win a war against a concept or a tactic?  
What has been less widely noticed is that,  
if you interpret that phrase literally,  
the war on terror is a war on an emotion,  
an emotion within *ourselves*.  
Terror is not something outside of us.  
Terror is not another person or an object or a place;  
it is a feeling of intense fear that manifests inside *us*.

So our leaders decided to make war on their own emotions,  
and the war on terror came to be.  
Anything that provoked fear became a target.  
The new logic was, if you feel afraid of something,  
you must wall it off or destroy it.  
So we bombed Al Qaeda camps in the Middle East  
and rejoiced in how many we killed.  
That many fewer bogeymen to invade our dreams.  
We threw as many suspects as we could find  
into the prison camp at Guantanamo  
and denied them the right to mount a legal defense.  
We had to be harsh with them,  
not give them a chance to make us feel that intolerable fear again.  
At home, as Eve Ensler put it so well,  
our government has robbed citizens of their basic rights  
in the name of homeland security.<sup>1</sup>  
Illegal wiretapping, the denial of habeas corpus,  
the list goes on—  
all in the name of stopping terror,  
an emotion in their own minds,  
no matter what the cost.

Yet, as terrible and terrifying as it was,  
what we experienced on 9/11 was not unique.  
Today terrorism and wars are threatening and killing people

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Ensler, *Insecure at Last: Losing It in Our Security-Obsessed World* (New York: Random House, 2006), p. 196.

all around the world.  
Nor is this anything new.  
For as long as there have been people,  
there have been conflicts and wars.  
Living out your life in peacetime is, if anything, unusual—  
certainly it's not to be taken for granted.  
Unlimited security is not part of the deal of being alive.  
So where did we go wrong?

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The story I told this morning is a very old story  
from the Zen Buddhist tradition:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger.  
He turned and fled.  
The tiger chased after him.  
The man came to a cliff.  
He caught hold of the root of a wild vine  
and swung himself down over the edge.  
The tiger sniffed at him from above.  
At the foot of the cliff,  
another tiger was waiting to eat him.  
Only the vine sustained him.  
Two mice, one white and one black, began to gnaw away the vine.  
The man saw a beautiful red strawberry  
growing out of a fissure in the cliff.  
He held on to the vine with one hand  
and picked the strawberry with the other.  
It tasted so sweet.

And that's the end of the story.  
At least that's as much as we are told.

This story seems to me appropriate to our political situation today.

A nation is attacked by a tiger.  
It panics, starts running, throwing up obstacles—  
tossing bombs and unconstitutional laws over its shoulder.  
It leaps over the precipice of war,  
only to find another tiger growling up at it from below,  
nightmarish twin to the first,  
summoned up by its own actions.  
Wherever it turns it sees enemies.  
And the mice are gnawing at the vine.

Could this have been a different story?  
If we could just once turn and face the tiger calmly,  
would the tiger remain a tiger,  
or would it turn into something else?  
If we had been able to sit with our fear  
and respond to the 9/11 attacks  
out of our strengths as a free and generous people,  
if we could even now stop being driven mad by our terror,  
what would the world look like?

Let me share with you  
a personal story that may have political implications.  
Rachel Remen is a doctor who works with people with cancer.  
Her work now is mostly as a spiritual and psychological counselor.  
One of her first patients was a young man, only 40 years old,  
who was dying of pancreatic cancer.  
He and his family knew he was going to die soon.  
He was trying to make his peace with his illness.  
His physical pain was under control.  
The worst of it was that he was anxious all the time.  
He could barely sleep.  
But he didn't know why.  
Dr. Remen asked him, had he been having any dreams?  
Just one, he said. He dreamed a ravenous beast was chasing him.  
He couldn't see it, but he knew it was there.

He woke up in a sweat but couldn't remember anything more.

Dr. Remen asked him if he would be willing to revisit the dream, to try to understand it better.

He agreed.

When he was ready,

Dr. Remen asked him to imagine he was back in the dream.

He imagined the beast chasing him, and he was running.

Dr. Remen coached him on ways he could free himself from the beast.

She said, "Try being invisible."

He answered, "It can see me."

She said, "Hide behind something."

"It knows where I am."

"Talk to it."

"It won't answer me."

He was getting more and more anxious.

She asked him what the beast was like.

Gradually he realized he knew a lot about it.

It was merciless and irresistible. You couldn't negotiate with it.

But it wasn't evil. He said it seemed "natural."

Finally Dr. Remen said, "It seems like you've tried everything.

Maybe the only thing left is to allow it to eat you."

He agreed and allowed himself to imagine the beast overtaking him.

He began to shake and sweat and weep.

This lasted so long, Dr. Remen became afraid. He was so weak already.

But then he stopped shaking and grew very calm.

He was silent for a long time.

Then he said softly, "There is light, there is only Light. I am Light."

He was silent again.

Eventually he opened his eyes.

"Hey," he said, "I don't feel anxious at all. That was great!"

A few days later Dr. Remen called to see how he was doing.

"Oh, I'm much worse," he said in an easy, happy tone of voice.

They talked for a while.  
He was calm and thoughtful.  
“I feel good,” he said, “sort of peaceful and joyful.”  
He was silent for a while.  
He started to laugh very softly and hung up the phone.  
A couple of days later he died.<sup>2</sup>

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A man is being chased by a tiger.  
He flees, he runs as fast as he can, but the tiger is right behind him.  
He is desperate, he flings himself off a cliff  
and holds on to that branch for dear life.  
Another tiger stares up at him from below,  
the stuff of nightmares.  
The branch is weakening.  
Maybe the only thing left is to let go  
and allow himself to be eaten.

In dreams and stories,  
when you dare to enter the belly of the beast,  
the beast is changed into a powerful friend, a saving protector,  
your own power, even.  
But you have to dare it.

The quest for security is bound to fail eventually.  
Earthquakes hit without warning.  
The stock market takes a dive and our savings are gone.  
Accidents can happen anywhere at any time.  
Eventually death will come for all of us, people and nations alike.  
But is the tiger really a tiger,  
or something else in disguise?

May we all find that bravery

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: Penguin, 1996), pp. 295–99.

that lives not in walling off and destroying,  
but in walking through fear.  
May we all find our way to that place within us  
at the still center of all things  
where fear passes away,  
where we can rest,  
and there is only light.

May it be so.  
Amen and blessed be.