

Department of Homeland Insecurity

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

Unitarian Universalist Meeting House in Chatham -- March 15, 2009

A few weeks ago I solicited suggestions for sermon topics and one of you suggested a sermon about how insecure we have become in our finances, particularly those of us who are not in the work force. Other than real estate, virtually all the private wealth of the people in this room is tied up in instruments called securities, but they don't provide much security these days. How many of us are afraid to open the monthly statement to see how much value our investments have lost?

But as I thought about it, the concept on insecurity has many strata, so this reflection might be an exercise in psycho-cultural archaeology, trying to separate the various layers.

There is personal insecurity; and the most important thing to know about that is everyone has it. You can convince yourself that everyone else is very confident and knows what they are doing and you are the only one who feels like you're faking it, but in fact we all fake it to some degree. I can remember the moment in my life, I was about five years old, when I realized that not everyone loved me unconditionally. I don't remember what happened, but I remember the feeling of the bubble of security bursting. How many of you can remember the painful insecurities of adolescence, when every negative comment seemed like a dagger aimed at your heart, threatening your very existence. The agony of trying to get the courage to pick up the phone and call that girl in your homeroom to ask for a date; the agony of waiting for the phone to ring. In my adolescence, I learned a crude way to compensate for my feelings of inadequacy was to try to prove that I was smarter than anyone else around, and it was only when I began my ministry training that I took a good hard look at this habit and tried to do something about it, and I'm still trying. I still catch myself trying to outsmart the people with whom I'm dealing, out of insecurity.

Forrest Church preached a good sermon on personal insecurity a few years ago and here is the nub of what he had to say:

...insecurity almost always comes packaged with feelings of inadequacy.

Insecurity is a form of narcissism. Being self-conscious, we are less conscious of others. For the same reason, we stand apart or feel apart, even in a crowd. With perfect one-way X-ray vision, we feel conspicuous in a world filled with people who appear to know exactly how to dress for life's every occasion. When fraught by feelings of inadequacy, we want nothing more than simply to disappear.

Success and failure; public speaking; crowds; the telephone; and, authorities: these things, among many others, trigger insecurity and leave us scattering for cover¹.

Overlying insecurity at the personal level are insecurities at the family, community, civic and national levels, all of which take our inbred personal insecurities and align them with a perceived threat to the larger entity. To go to the national level, in the 1960s, we built the national security state based on an obsession with security during the cold war. How many of you built fallout shelters in your house? Does this seem silly today? It didn't at the time; particularly after the Cuban missile crisis, most of us took very seriously the idea that we could

¹"Insecurity" by Forrest Church October 5, 2003

<http://www.forrestchurch.com/writings/sermons/insecurity.html>

get into a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. What can you do about a threat to your well-being posed by missiles in silos half a world away? Carve out an expansion in your basement and stock it with canned goods.

One would think this insecurity should have retreated somewhat after the collapse of global communism, but the national security state has its own logic. We had already shredded some of the privacy protections which is our heritage in favor of Big Brother when on September 11, 2001, the real world delivered a new trigger for our national insecurity – a threat from global jihad. Most of us applauded as the administration created a Department of Homeland Security, for clearly security was what we thought we lacked. But once again certain forces turned the insecurity to political advantage and Big Brother grew again. The public went along with the government reading our mails and listening to our phone calls and checking our luggage and putting us through metal detectors because we had to catch the terrorists that might blow up our cities or our airplanes. Such a shredding of what America stands for was necessary to protect us from “them.” For almost a decade, we have watched the color-coded alerts from the Department of Homeland Security which seem suspiciously timed to coincide with the political needs of Republican candidates.

But how quaint those old insecurities look now. While our government was loudly proclaiming that it was our only salvation from terrorist threats, the real threat to our national well-being was ignored. Now we are faced with a possible complete collapse of the worldwide economic system. If economic activity comes to a halt, we will all have to revert to subsistence living or starve. No terrorist bomb has the clout to accomplish this. Even if we grant, in our most nightmare scenarios, a terrorist access to a nuclear device, that’s one nuclear device in one city, the rest of the world could recover from that. I haven’t done the math, but I would bet that the chances of any of us being killed or even affected by a terrorist attack have never been greater than a fraction of a percent.

So we have insecurity on a deep personal level, part of everyone’s psychic makeup, and on top of that insecurity at a national level with threats from the Soviet Union, from global jihad, and now from economic collapse. One way to get rid of a migraine headache is to drop a cinder block on your toe; with what we’ve got to be afraid of today, the fears of yesterday seem like child’s play.

Lawrence Summers said on Friday that fear, lack of consumer confidence, was the chief stumbling block to economic recovery. We have all drawn in our horns, and many of us can’t borrow, and there is a feeling that we’ve been living too high on the hog anyway, and we should make a correction. But of course, what the economy needs now is for us to resume spending; the frugality that is good for us on a personal level is bad for us on a societal level.

It strikes me that our present economic insecurity is of a different order than our old insecurities either at the personal or national level. With the benefit of hindsight, we know we were not quite the hopeless geeks that we thought we were in Junior High School or at least that everyone else was just as awkward. There really wasn’t much personal danger to us from a Russian attack during the Cold War, nor was there more than a ghost of a chance that we would be blown up in a terrorist bombing after 9-11.

But everyone is presently being affected by the economic downturn, and many of us may be severely affected before it’s all over. Moreover, the very global nature of it means that we can’t expect rescue from overseas. And as I’ve said before, this is a crisis of faith. When we’ve played by the rules and the whole game turns against us, it shakes our faith. Our structures of meaning start to come unglued. The ground opens under our feet, and we find ourselves staring into the abyss of meaninglessness.

So we’re in a fix. What do our religious traditions say about insecurity?

A Buddhist friend of mine said that worry is the interest we pay in advance on a debt we don't owe. We always fear a potential loss before it happens; we cling to whatever it is that we fear to lose. The Buddha teaches that the root of our suffering is our craving and clinging.

There is a story a Japanese monk and poet named Ryokan, who lived away up on a mountain in simple hut. All he had was his begging bowl and a cloak. Once a robber came and demanded that he give up his money. Ryokan responded that he didn't have any money, but he had his cloak, and he gave it to the robber. The robber went away, and Ryokan looked out at the beautiful rising moon and wrote a poem in which he regretted that he could not give the robber the moon, for that was something of real value.

What does the Buddha say about insecurity? It is an unhappiness born of craving and clinging. We were never promised security, and we have become attached to security, and the thought of losing this is the source of our unhappiness. When we realize that we were never meant to survive, that we are passing through, the anxiety goes away.

In the Jewish tradition, insecurity is found in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham made a covenant with God that God will make of him a great nation; God also promised that Sarah, in her eighties would conceive and bear a son, a promise that sounded so far-fetched that Abraham and Sarah fell on the floor laughing when they heard it, and then when the child came after all, they named him Isaac, which means laughter. Isaac is the way that God's promise can be realized, and yet God then tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to him. This kind of command is not designed to instill a sense of security. It is a cliff-hanger which is only resolved when a ram is found in the bushes, to be sacrificed instead. But the lesson of the chapter is repeated over and over in the Hebrew Bible: to follow the holy command is to be insecure. God doesn't provide security, God provides insecurity. Jonah, like all of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, was leading a secure life when the command of God shook him out of his security and sent him on a fast boat to Nineveh; on the way he had an adventure with a big fish.

In the Christian tradition, that first century hippie Jesus preaches against security: Don't worry about your lives, where you shall eat or drink or whether you shall be clothed. Consider the ravens and the lilies. Can any of you add one hour to your life by worrying? Strive not for the things of this world, but strive for God's kingdom.

When Jesus sent his disciples out around the sea of Galilee to spread the good news of the coming of the Kingdom, he instructed them to take no purse, no coat, no food, not even sandals. They were to knock at the door of households and if they were invited in, they were to eat whatever was given to them.² In other words, to follow Jesus originally meant to voluntarily strip yourself of every shred of security.

Over and over, Jesus emphasized that the religious life to which he called people required a rejection of security. One person asked for time to bury his dead father and Jesus said, let the dead bury the dead.³

And the ethos of the early Christian church emphasized a rejection of security:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. (1 John 4:18)

Paul says in the Epistle to the Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your

²Luke 9, 10.

³Luke 9: 59-60.

mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

In accordance with this ethos, Christians in the centuries before Constantine presented themselves as a voluntary sacrifice, walking right into the jaws of death, the ultimate insecurity, because of their ultimate faith in the promise of life everlasting.

For the Christian and Jewish traditions, then, a confidence in God substituted for the desire for security. It wasn't that God provided security; quite the contrary. It was that to have a relationship with the holy made security a secondary consideration.

On the Universalist side, we inherit this confidence of the Christian tradition. But our Unitarian Universalist tradition is covenantal; the covenant is not so much with God as with our fellow humans. There was a good article in the UU World this month about what that covenantal tradition means in hard times. Chuck Collins founded the organization United for a Fair Economy, which works to reduce economic inequality that is at the root of many of our problems. He says

In the coming year, I believe the financial crisis will worsen and personal economic security will further erode for millions of us. This economic crisis is not "out there." It is real and present in our daily lives.

Many people will face these challenges in isolation. Even those connected to religious congregations, unions, or civic groups may be embarrassed or ashamed to reach out for help.

But Chuck sees in this crisis an opportunity to build community:

I'm excited by the movement of "Common Security Clubs" that are forming around the country. A common security club is a place where people come together to look at our real security in the face of the economic crisis. It is part study group, part self-help and mutual aid group, and part political action group. In these clubs, we learn about how we got into this mess and what we can do together to increase our economic security.

Our "mutual aid" muscles may be out of shape. Our ability to exchange gifts and practice neighborly generosity may have atrophied a bit in the last generation. It is important to start simple, with the small weights. Some clubs have started bulk food-buying groups, made pacts to get out of debt, organized parties to weatherize each other's houses. My church community already has many of these practices. We cook and care for one another when someone is sick. One Sunday, twenty of us raked leaves for twenty minutes and filled twenty bags. It is a living example of "many hands make light work."

Anyone want to volunteer to start a Common Security Club for Chatham?

Forrest Church asserts that insecurity as a character trait is basically narcissistic, and maybe that applies to insecurities about our economic conditions as well. Narcissism is not the most deadly sin; the remedy for it is simply to look outward, to the lives of others, to rekindle the connections.

We are going to need to rekindle connections in this economy. I heard on the radio this week about a program called aging in place which helps seniors stay in their houses by providing logistical support from a central location; there are program up and running in Martha's Vineyard and Falmouth – why not here?

Our pastoral Care team in this church – Sybille Colby, Linda Redding, Jean Raymond,

Karen Nickerson, Mary Chesnut, Mary Parsons, Sue Bauer, and Ellen Cowan – does a wonderful job of reaching out to people, trying to hold together a safety net. This is part of an anti-insecurity network.

All the care in the world, of course, will not prevent bad things from happening. People will have accidents, people will lose their jobs, people will get sick. What we can do to alleviate the sufferings from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune is to offer connection, to let people know they need not suffer alone.

Thomas Friedman wrote this in the New York Times last week:

Let's today step out of the normal boundaries of analysis of our economic crisis and ask a radical question: What if the crisis of 2008 represents something much more fundamental than a deep recession? What if it's telling us that the whole growth model we created over the last 50 years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall — when Mother Nature and the market both said: "No more."⁴

I will leave you with the thought that the insecurities of this time may be just the price we have to pay for a fundamental restructuring of our society, but that the hopeful thing is that such restructuring gives us a chance to establish a new basis for community, for a caring, supportive community and ultimately that is our path, not to security, but to justice and freedom. Amen.

Readings

Luke 12 22 He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 26 If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith! 29 And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. 30 For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

⁴The Inflection Is Near? By Thomas L. Friedman March 7, 2009

From “Working together to create common security;
Common Security Clubs can help us share each other's burdens in a time of economic crisis.” by
Chuck Collins
UU World Spring 2009

I recently had coffee with a single friend who rents an apartment in my neighborhood. She was worried her job would be cut.

I said, offhandedly, “You can come live with us.”

“I can?” she said, and started to cry.

“Of course. You will always have a place to live.”

She began to sob.

Then a thought crossed my mind, “as long as we have our house.”

How quickly we go to our most vulnerable place.