Security, Liberty, and Freedom from Fear

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It was a cold, late winter's Saturday, the sky a canopy of gray clouds, matching the spirit of the times. When 100,000 Americans gathered on March 4, 1933, to hear the new president—a crowd extending from the steps of Washington's Capitol far into the distance around the reflecting pool and down the great mall—times were darker than they are today, much darker. Near the bottom of the deepest depression in its history, the boom had gone bust, almost one third of the population could find no work—six times today's unemployment rate—soup lines wound around entire city blocks, and shantytowns turned parks into slums. Thousands of schools were closed. There was a desperate run on the banks. People turned against their neighbors, looking for scapegoats, driven to violence by desperation. The whole fabric of society was unraveling before a helpless nation's very eyes.

Though he had shown little over an honorable yet unspectacular public career to indicate he had the stuff to reverse the nation's fortunes, Franklin Delano Roosevelt put his finger on the problem, uttering the hitherto unspoken word that lurked in everyone's heart—fear. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he said.

No other presidential address matches Roosevelt's First Inaugural in the directness and immediacy of its impact. At the end of the speech, witnesses say, the applause was thunderous, rolling like waves. The president clapped in rhythm with the crowd. To the millions more listening on radio, the effect was even greater, more intimately felt, almost personal, as if he were speaking to each American individually.

Any speech can be heard. This one the audience actually lived. Our president's confidence became the nation's own.

In the morning papers, the press—hardened and skeptical then as today—reflected the relief and exultation of a weary people. Even pundits who faulted the text on political grounds applauded its tone. "No more vital utterance was ever made by a president of the United States," read an editorial in the Atlanta Constitution. "Confidence literally arose from its hiding place and is today a living reality," another journalist wrote. By saying what he did when he did and in the way he did, Roosevelt gave heart to an entire country.

FDR's second immortal speech was his Annual Address to Congress delivered on January 6, 1941, familiarly known as "The Four Freedoms Address." In it he proclaimed four basic freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These freedoms demand our protection and extension "everywhere in the world," he said. Just months before the nation's entry into World War II, that President Roosevelt should include a new freedom—freedom from fear—among those essential to humanity is significant. Fear cripples the human heart. FDR reminded us again that fear itself constitutes a fundamental danger to human existence. By adding this new freedom to others familiar in American history, he elevated freedom from fear to the founders' altar.

Fear is as contagious as it can be toxic. That is why it is such an effective political tool. Yet only when fear lifts can the human heart open and thrive. The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is fear.

Think for a moment about love. It certainly doesn't offer security. Every time we give our heart away, we risk having it dashed to pieces. Love is grief's advance party. Fear promises a safer path: refuse to give away your heart and it will never be broken, either by deceit or by loss. And it is true, armored hearts are invulnerable. We can eliminate a world of trouble from our lives simply by closing our hearts. Yet the trouble from which we are liberating ourselves is necessary trouble. We need it as we need breath. Since the most precious and enduring lifework is signed by love, to avoid the risk of love is to cower from life's only perfect promise.

Not that fear doesn't operate under its own powerful and seductive logic. Above all else, fear preaches caution. In fact, if fear had a mantra, it would be "Better safe than sorry." This advice is easy to follow. Superficially, playing it safe makes both emotional and physical sense. Yet, safety and risk only appear to be mutually exclusive. We must be as cautious about safety as we are about risk. Take no risks and we still run the danger of leading a sorry life. In fact, when it comes to

things that really matter, in exchange for the benefits that risk can bring, it is sometimes better to be sorry than safe.

Even if safety should become our primary objective in life, to keep ourselves safe is impossible. People die in beds and in bathtubs. Joggers die. Vegetarians die. So do non-smokers and teetotalers. Even people with low cholesterol die. Not to mention the millions who die of complications from anxiety itself. To be free of acceptable risk is not life's goal, but its enemy. By inviting non-being to the party years before one's death day, fear protects us not from death, but from life.

In ethics, the golden mean for correct behavior falls equidistant between extremes, the right amount of any given quality perceived as ethically superior to too little or too much. Generosity, for instance, is the golden mean between miserliness and profligacy. Aristotle introduced the golden mean to Western philosophy twenty-five hundred years ago. Weighing fear according to this ideal, the preferred alternative to panic is not fearlessness but prudence (the half-way point between the two). The word prudence today suggests fear, but originally it signified "right thinking." Numbered among the seven classic virtues, it meant knowing the good and acting accordingly. In terms of the familiar Serenity Prayer—"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference" —prudence is the "wisdom to know the difference." So understood, far from being a drab virtue, prudence invites us to be bold, not timid, as long as we aren't foolish.

Security is not a golden mean, but one end of a continuum that extends all the way to untrammeled freedom on the other. In this sense, security and liberty are opposites. Objects that are secured lock into place; they cannot move. We must therefore decide just how safe we wish to be, never forgetting that security itself is a form of bondage. Both security and bondage entail a loss of freedom.

In our search for the right level of security, there are national ramifications to consider as well as personal ones. To obsess over threats to safety while ignoring threats to liberty demonstrates as little enlightened self-interest as does a person who thinks nothing about borrowing logs from the walls of his home to replenish his supply of firewood. As the house grows draftier, in order to keep the fire burning brightly enough to make up for the lost heat, he must take more and more wood from the walls. Tending his hearth, he destroys his home.

Since we can purchase no security whose warranty will not one day expire, wisdom counsels lavishing at least a little security in exchange for liberty. Once we as a nation have done all the obvious and sensible things to protect ourselves against another terrorist attack, each additional fraction of protection exacts a proportional sacrifice of

freedom. And not only freedom. When our alarms warn us only against threats that imperil our safety, they fail to alert us to dangers that may jeopardize our humanity. "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster," wrote the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. "When you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you." The first lesson of history is this: Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them.

In an Aristotelian sense, Freedom alone is not the answer: Liberty uber alles, security be damned. Freedom is an instrument, not a virtue. Freedom from fear, for instance, incorporates both security and liberty, balancing the two. If I truly believed that the administrations actions since 9/11 had actually made us significantly safer, I would much more willingly trade a measure of liberty for the safety security brings. Ironically, given the controversy surrounding this General Assembly, one area where the government has been almost criminally lax in offering the nation greater security is in its ports. We are far less likely to be endangered by someone who sneaks more than three ounces of mouthwash onto an airplane than by the delivery of a rogue nuclear weapon in one of our haphazardly monitored ports.

The Aristotelian mean is hard to hit in a dangerous world. To refuse to exchange some freedom for security is childish. But when our freedoms are sacrificed wantonly under fear's goad, heightened vigilance is called for. Fear has become the chosen instrument of our national leadership, dividing our nation, isolating us from our friends, turning us meanspirited, inspiring, I may say, a serious case of nostalgia for the kind of unanxious leadership that lifted the hearts of a much more embattled and endangered nation a little more than 6 decades ago by reminding us that the only thing we had to fear was fear itself.

Anxiety and fear cannot be eliminated completely of course. They are part of the human condition. Fear of terrorism exemplifies perhaps the least tractable forms of fear, namely dread, a fear of the unknown. In its most familiar form, dread combines the fear of death with a fear of life. Aware of life's fragility, yet with a diminished appreciation for its preciousness, we look for stability and predictability where neither can be found. Every risk we might take to splash some color into our lives strikes us as either imprudent or so hopeless that we might as well not take the chance. We say to ourselves, "Nothing ventured, nothing lost."

Dread also expresses itself in a fear that lies at the heart of the human predicament—the fear of abandonment. As long as we live, we are never safe from loss. Others leave us along life's way. And when our own time comes, life itself abandons us; nothing can prevent our fall.

The fear of falling—not in a physical but in an intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual sense—perfectly describes how dread affects the

mind's inner ear. In the felt and frightening tension between being and non-being, we experience vertigo. We reach a point where we can no longer abide feelings of vulnerability. For this very reason, dread places physical and emotional invulnerability—safety and security—above all other human goods. If we do not climb, we will not fall.

Our parents teach us the same lesson from the time we are toddlers. We are in the playground happily swinging away—"Not so high!" they yell. In their temporary role of protectors, understandably they try to keep us safe. Worrying about us and instructing us in life's dangers is a parent's job. But when we are warned repeatedly against expressing curiosity or taking even the slightest risk, our parents' efforts leave a lasting impression.

Here is the problem, and it's an abiding one. The over-protected child is not all that much safer than the average toddler. Even when maintained with smothering vigilance, the nick and bruise patrol fails in its objective. Where it succeeds is in creating a frightened adult. After thousands of shrill warnings and half as many repetitions of the solemn words "I told you so," to our impressionable minds curiosity and risk themselves become suspect. Once out in the world on our own, a voice within us echoes, "Not so high!" No wonder fear so effortlessly reigns over the average adult mind.

Yet history shows we can be liberated from fear, even in the darkest of times. Franklin Roosevelt proved that, shepherding the nation as an unanxious presence through its most perilous trial since the civil war. He was far from perfect, missing the mean between security and liberty time and again, but he led by faith not fear, which in this imperfect world makes all the difference.

Let me close on a theological note. In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, God doesn't just say "let there be light, and there was light." It takes four days (in God's good time) before the proper balance is struck between light and darkness. And still the darkness remains—in the firmament, between the waters, in our own lives. It is as if God keeps toying with the balance. We keep toying with the balance also. The hope contained in these first few verses of the Bible is that, at the end of each, God says, "It is good."

It's hard to recognize that sometimes, especially when the fear drums beat so loudly that love can't make a safe appearance to witness to and celebrate the light. That is our charge. Not to ignore security but to banish fear so that love and the enlightenment it brings may once again open our hearts. Not only to those like us, but also to those with whom we disagree. Remember, it is not foolish but prudent to seek security, as prudent as it is to protect liberty. remembering that both contest the same spectrum and prudent balance is not easy to come by. In fact, it is

almost impossible to strike, which perhaps is one reason we get so angry when those we disagree with sacrifice our good for theirs.

In the Greek Orthodox Church, out of the cool darkness of an early spring evening, the celebration of Easter begins with the blessing of new fire. Struck from flint, this new fire passes from one candle to another until the church is filled with light. Trappist monk and modern mystic Thomas Merton describes how, long ago on Easter night, Russian peasants would carry the new fire home back to their cottages. "The light would scatter and travel in all directions through the darkness, and the desolation of the night would be pierced and dispelled as lamps came on in the windows of the farmhouses one by one." Emerging from the darkness out of deathly shadows, new fire is kindled from candle to candle, lighting home after home. “Even darkness, even evil, even death, seen by the light of the sacramental fire. . . can contribute accidentally, but existentially, to the life, growth and liberty of our souls,” Merton observes. “And [in] the night, then: the night of inertia, anguish and ignorance . . . is the passage through non-being into being, the recovery of existence from non-existence, the resurrection of life out of death.”

To practice spreading light in the darkness does not mean extinguishing the darkness. This we cannot do. But we can—if free from the grip of fear—see that shadows are only the action of light being cast. By catching but a glimmer of the powering light, we can both feel and see strange beauty, emerging from our waking dream of death to appreciate life more fully. As our eyes grow accustomed, we discover that we can see in the dark.

Perhaps this is all we can hope for here on earth: Heaven and Hell at once, stark in juxtaposition, inviting us to enter the flames, daring us to strike a balance, challenging us to overcome our fears by opening our hearts, by daring to risk the insecurity love offers. If so, all we can hope for is certainly enough.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.