

The Poem and the Science

UU Presentation September 10

Opening words:

Aspens

*Written by Jayne Jacobs, June 2013,
after a solo backpacking trip in Black Hills National Forest*

Families of sentinels
adorned with quivering green
stand guard on the hillside.
Dark, wise eyes peer
from the smooth white trunks.

The forest is watching.

Glistening leaves tremble in the wind
making sounds like
chattering brooks,
rippling like water.
Accompanied by creaking branches
and a robin's lilting warble.

Nature's own music.

I lean my cheek
against the smooth paper bark
and feel pulsing
within, without.

Life.

Every stone, each blade of grass
breathes its own spirit.
There is no corruption,
no selfish aim.

Nature is a feeling.

Here in this glade,
I am not lonely, though alone.
I am not afraid.

I am home.

Presentation:

Before I begin, I feel the need to preface with a bit of a content warning today, as parts of my presentation will include mentions of mental health struggles including self harm and suicide ideation.

This device is called a SPOT. When I was 20, I told my family I wanted to attempt a solo backpacking trip. I was already a seasoned backpacker and knew how to pack so the weight was distributed efficiently, how and where to do a bear hang, dig a latrine, purify water 3 different ways, orient using a map and compass (thankfully because my directional sense is terrible), and other basics of backwoods living. I planned out very specifically where I would go and the route I would take. Five days in the Black Hills National Forest. My dad would drop me off and pick me up and meanwhile, I would press the OK button on the spot three to five times a day to let him know I was alright. The spot has 3 messages it can send out via satellite. The first is "I'm okay, all's well" and it pings my coordinates to Dad's email. The second is "I'm not okay, but I'm not dying, just please come pick me up." (also pings my location). And the third button is "I'm in a life threatening situation and need help now." That feature would ping my message and location to my dad and also alert the local search and rescue services.

It was raining when we got there, but I still put on my pack and poncho, said goodbye and hiked off into the woods. When I got to the top of a ridge about 20 minutes later, I looked down and could see my dad's car was still parked at the trailhead. Later he told me he was half hoping I would come back. It took much courage for him to let his daughter go off into the woods like that and I'm sure he never would have agreed to let me do it without the spot. This was before I'd gotten a cell phone and it probably wouldn't have had service in that wilderness area anyway.

Meanwhile, I hiked and it rained. And poured. And drizzled. The precipitation was, more or less, non-stop. For 2 whole days I did nothing but hike in the rain and sit in my tent. My extra pairs of socks never did get completely dry. On the third day, the sun finally came out and I was so excited I secured my camp, packed a day pack, and went on an expedition to explore. I saw a fox that morning as well as several deer, birds that I didn't know the names of and flowers that I did. Thanks to my terrible sense of direction I mentioned earlier, I did get lost. What was supposed to be a 12-mile day hike turned into a 22-miler over the course of 7 hours. My dad remarked later that my pings that day were all over the place so he knew I was getting around! After 2 days of being stuck in a tent, I was just so excited to be free to roam and soak up sunshine!

Unfortunately, that excitement took me so far off course that by 7pm I was still almost 2 miles from camp and my feet looked like they had gone through a meat grinder. Word of advice. Even if you're like me and never get blisters, don't count on that tough skin to be able to hold up after 2 days of never being completely dry. I was quite literally crawling the last mile back to my campsite and made it just as the sun was setting. The next morning, I could barely stand without pain, let alone walk. With two days left on my trip, I didn't want to spend them stuck in the tent again and I figured

out that the trailhead was only a 5.5 mile walk if I took a specific series of trails. The trails in that area were interwoven and crisscrossing all over the place (probably how I got lost the previous day hike). So, I got out my spot and pressed the second button. "I'm not okay, but I'm not dying or anything. Please come get me." Then I packed up camp, shouldered my 50-pound pack, and limped pathetically down the trail. I made sure to press the "I'm okay" button followed by the other "I'm not okay please come get me button" every 30 minutes or so so that if my dad had access to his email he would be able to see I was making progress toward the trailhead and figure out I'd meet him there. Even though it took me the better part of 3 hours to limp 5 miles, I got there about an hour before he did, took off my boots, and aired my feet out, sitting on a picnic table. Despite the rain and blisters, I enjoyed every second of that trip. The solitude. The connection. The challenge. The relief of seeing Dad's car pull around the bend and going out to pizza after 4 days of trail mix and dehydrated food. I enjoyed it to the point I did another solo trip one month later, up in Fishlake National Forest in Utah! That one was rain-free and blister-free.

This month's theme is fear and bravery. When I tell people about my solo backpacking trips, the response I usually get is something along the lines of, "Wow, that must have been scary!" or "You're so brave!" While a part of me wonders if they'd say the same thing to a man, the other part knows that courage was not the reason I took those trips. In fact, I was going on those trips because I wanted to escape. It was 2012 and I had been struggling in the dark with my mental health for a couple years by then. The self harming was sometimes out of control, I was dealing with an eating disorder, and was desperately trying to keep my stuff together on the outside because I didn't have the knowledge or insight to know what the heck was wrong with me on the inside.

It was a time in my life where, up to that point, I had done everything right the way I knew how. I had gotten good grades, attended church and was at the top of my Sunday School class for being able to rattle off scripture quotes, I was already an experienced musician and played organ and bagpipes in addition to cello and piano and I even played string bass in the Wyoming Symphony Orchestra. Everything was fine! Except that it wasn't. There was something wrong with me. Something that just didn't work right and I couldn't put words to what it was. And so I'd escape. I'd hole up inside myself or I'd wander out into the wilderness to try to get away from whatever inner demons were tormenting me. It wasn't courage that sent me on those trips. It was fear. And my personal response to fear has almost always been to run away.

I'd like to talk a little about fear. In 2014, I attended a creative writing class at Casper College and one of our poetry prompts was to write about what scares us.

What Scares Me?

I used to have nightmares
about growling phantom wolves,
red plastic airplanes that pursue me everywhere,
crayons that turn to multicolored oceans of quicksand.
Right now, I am afraid to write this poem—

afraid of being exposed, vulnerable.
I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid
of failure—
of not living up to my potential,
or finding out my dreams are simply that
and my nightmares are reality.
I am afraid of losing a finger, a hand, my hearing,
and going senile because I can't make music.
I am afraid to practice piano today because I might sound awful.
I am afraid of emotion—
unpredictable wolves that penetrate my existence and consume my soul.
I am afraid to love
because I don't understand it.
And I don't know if I've ever felt it.
I am afraid of being unloved. Or unable to love.
I am afraid to cry
because I'm scared of the sound of my sobs.
Sounds that I can't control.
Tears that leak those hidden emotions.
A leak needs to be fixed. Stopped up.
I am afraid to be caught with tears in my eyes
and of people pursuing me like red plastic airplanes demanding to know
what they cannot begin to comprehend.
I am afraid of being noticed.
I am afraid of being ignored.
I am afraid to talk because I may say something wrong.
I am afraid of crowds and loud noises.
I am afraid of being alone and lonely.
Mostly, I am afraid of this world
and so many despicable humans who
scribble with their crayons all over God's masterpiece,
constantly quarreling over the red one, the blue,
while the green only sits there, unnoticed, ignored.

Jayne Esther Jacobs
October 2014

I wanted to share this poem because it highlights that fears can often contradict themselves. For instance, being afraid of playing music but afraid of being unable to play music. Being afraid of being noticed but also ignored. Afraid of people but also of being alone. Fears can change and shift. I'm no longer as afraid of expressing emotion or of crying but I still try not to make noise when I do. I'm apparently still afraid of not having control over such sounds. Being hunted by wolves is a recurring nightmare from childhood and I still have those dreams on occasions when I'm overwhelmed by

something in waking life. Like many here, I am still afraid, if not even more afraid now, of losing our beautiful Earth to greedy humans with their profit-hungry politics.

The psychology of fear is fascinating. It's really all about perception, as Spike Milligan so eloquently describes in his poem, *Bump*:

Things that go 'bump' in the night
Should not really give one a fright.
It's the hole in each ear
That lets in the fear,
That, and the absence of light!

Fear is a necessary emotion which exists to keep us safe. We need to feel fear to alert our minds and bodies to danger. On a biochemical level, the activation of the sympathetic nervous system releases adrenaline and cortisol, which increase blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing rate. Blood flows away from the heart and organs and into the limbs, preparing them to do something to protect the body such as start throwing kicks and punches or perhaps make a run for safety.

Interestingly, fear involves some of the same chemical reactions as pleasant emotions including excitement. In fact, when I have a student who is fearful about performing (or when I myself am experiencing performance anxiety), one can sometimes tune into that fear and re-frame it as excitement. Often, the simple act of smiling, mindful breathing, or intentional movement can send a message to our brains that "Everything is A-okay." Like pushing that OK button on the spot. It might not eliminate the fear completely, but it can allow us to better function from a different mindset.

There are circumstances where we can let ourselves experience fear while remaining in a safe environment, such as a scary movie or a roller coaster. Some of us actually enjoy this. Psychologists call these "staged fear experiences," pointing out that, alongside adrenaline and cortisol, the brain produces more of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is associated with pleasure. We may seek out these staged fear experiences for the screams and thrills and are often left smiling or laughing at the end, whether out of relief that it's over and we survived or genuine enjoyment and an urge to do it again and get another dopamine hit. Staged fear can make us feel alive. Of course, it doesn't work this way for everyone. I enjoy a good horror movie on occasion but most of my family won't watch them. While I had a total blast whitewater rafting with my dad a couple years ago, you couldn't pay my mom enough to get on that raft. For her, such an experience elicits more stress than excitement.

Even for the thrill seekers among us, fear may have unintended consequences. When the amygdala (a part of the brain involved in perceiving emotional messages) senses fear, the cerebral cortex (the part that controls judgment and reasoning) becomes impaired. Some describe it as foggy thinking or tunnel vision. Even in a staged fear situation like a scary movie, you might very well react to a monster popping on screen by screaming and throwing your hands up, showering movie watchers around you with popcorn and soda. This may happen because the brain wasn't able to rationalize that the threat was only on the screen, so it told the body to react as if what it perceived were real.

During the first night of my trip to Fishlake National Forest (this was my second trip without the rain), I awoke to pitch blackness and the sound of shuffling around my tent. I remember feeling my insides go cold and my breath catch in my throat as my mind instantly formed the image of a bear walking around my camp. I lay there, frozen in fear and listening for who knows how long until I slowly sat up and peeked my head out of my one-person lay-down tent. No bear. Part of the tent fly had come loose and the fabric was flapping in the breeze with a fwap-fwap sound against the ground. Seeing the utterly harmless source of my fear was such a relief I laughed, reattached the fly, lay back down, and went to sleep.

So, while the experience of fear is more or less universal, the reaction or tolerance of it is highly individualized. Most of us have heard of the responses to fear being fight, flight, or freeze and you may even know what your own typical reaction is. Fear is one of those emotions that is deeply connected to primal instinct. While we do need fear to survive, there are cases where the experience of fear greatly outweighs the actual threat.

We can find an example of this arguably irrational fear in psychological pathology. In my own life, I've experienced anxiety that frequently escalated to panic attacks for much of my emerging adulthood. Around age 22, I wrote the following poem on feeling fear and lack of control.

Trapped with the skeleton

A crate bolted shut
 with me trapped inside.
It's dark and it's musty
 and in one small, dusty,
 cobwebby corner
 a skeleton hides.

A black cargo truck
 with that crate shoved inside.
Down hot asphalt roads
 beyond my control,
Bumping bones rattling,
 I hang on for dear life.

The thing slides toward me,
 all pale and gory,
 and I huddle harder
 and try not to cry.
Trapped with my history
 along for the ride,
No control, but I know:
 like that skeleton, I'll die.

Jayne Esther Jacobs
August 2015

For my own part, one of my greatest fears is of being trapped or helpless, both physically and mentally. For much of my early adulthood, I felt trapped in not knowing—trapped in anxiety. The skeleton represents both the past and the future and the dark enclosure of the truck is the lack of control or lack of knowing. For me, writing about what I didn't understand—my fear in this case, helped me begin to explore and learn about it from a safe and often creative perspective. Metaphors helped me give substance to ideas that only existed in theory—ideas like emotions.

Psychologists speculate that fear and anxiety originally evolved to be a survival mechanism. Those with fear responses were more likely to avoid a potential threat and thus survived to pass on those traits to their offspring. Humans have come quite far, evolutionarily speaking, creating a modern society free from the previously regular threats of, say, sabertooth tigers. And yet, our brains are a bit slower to evolve in a way that regulates our natural fear response to our current environment. As a result, pathological fear, such as in a phobia or anxiety, causes the brain or body to react, sometimes disproportionately, to something in the environment, even in cases where there is no actual danger.

There are various types of pathological fear. While a phobia is usually specific to a situation or object, anxiety can be generalized and, if not treated, can greatly inhibit a person from experiencing life without a constant feeling of being in danger. Anxiety can also lead to panic disorders and panic attacks where an individual may lose control of their fear to the point where they shake uncontrollably, hyperventilate, sometimes feel like they are dying, or experience other severe physical and mental symptoms.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD can also cause disproportionate reactions, but the difference is that the fear is linked to a specific experience. Trauma can cause the sympathetic nervous system to be easily activated as the body's need for self-preservation kicks in at the slightest hint of a threat. When this happens, a person may react with their fear response—whether it be to lash out and fight or to dissociate—fleeing or freezing. The brain might even convince someone with PTSD that they are in their traumatic situation once more, disconnecting them from reality in what we call a flashback.

How are these pathologies managed and treated? Most of the treatments for phobias involve something called “exposure therapy” where the client is allowed to experience and process their fear gradually within a safe environment and with the guidance of a mental health professional. Another term for exposure therapy is systematic desensitization in which a person will start small, perhaps with an image of what they are afraid of, gradually working toward a more realistic confrontation of their phobia.

For PTSD, a technique called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) has had huge success in helping clients reclaim and re-frame traumatic experiences. In this technique, a mental health professional presents bilateral stimulation—either visual, auditory, or tactile, or a combination. By using bilateral stimuli, one can activate both sides of the brain and therefore prime it to access memories, thoughts, or feelings that might be buried or otherwise ignored. Between episodes of bilateral stimulation, a mental health professional will guide the client to talk about and process their experience. Various studies have demonstrated that EMDR could be more effective than other behavioral treatments for trauma in that it often provides quicker and more permanent results.

In my profession, music therapy, a method called Bonny Guided Imagery and Music is similar to EMDR in that it guides a client through processing trauma and memories, using music listening to facilitate whole brain processing. Music therapists have to be specifically trained and certified in this method to be able to use it, just as EMDR requires special training for a mental health therapist.

Someone with generalized anxiety may learn techniques and coping skills to send their body messages that it's okay, possibly through cognitive behavioral techniques or meditation. The more they are able to learn about themselves and their reactions, the more they may be able to get ahead of their anxiety, like a parent guiding a fearful child. As one who once struggled with severe anxiety, I myself learned techniques that have been successful both regulating it in the moment and getting ahead of it if I know a situation might give rise to anxiety.

For myself, most of those techniques involve some sort of rhythmic stimulation, such as walking, tapping, or internal musicking, in other words, singing or thinking music in one's head. For others, it might be focusing on something neutral in the environment—taking note of everything blue, for instance. Mindful breaths and counting for inhales and exhales. Last week, Matt told us about his technique in a moment of fear reciting, "Just keep going" as he climbed.

While I was at Colorado State University, I had the opportunity to be a part of an Electroencephalogram, or EEG study. That's when electrodes are placed on the scalp to measure brainwaves—the electrical firings of neurons. You've probably heard there are different forms of brainwaves such as Alpha or Beta waves. EEG researchers are looking at those as well as at certain peaks or valleys called event-related potentials, or ERP's. Various ERP's can tell us things about focus, response to stimuli, or even act as markers for brain-related disabilities such as in sensory processing disorder, autism, and even schizophrenia.

Someone participating in an EEG study is instructed to do a simple task, such as press a button or watch a video. For the study I participated in, the task was to tap a button every time I heard a beep. It didn't take long for me to discover the beeps were evenly spaced and I decided to make this boring task more interesting for myself by matching the beeps and thus my button-tapping to a song I often musicked in my head—the Pachelbel Canon in D. Now, in the past, I'd used this song as well as Vivaldi's 4 Seasons to dispel anxiety. Internal singing and layering harmonies and melodies on top of each other gives my mind something to focus on that I can also control and which I have

positive associations with. At the end of the study, the researcher told me he'd rarely seen brainwave responses like what he got from me and because of the abnormality, my data was unusable in his research. In his words, "About 15 seconds in, we got these high alpha waves that pretty much contaminated anything else we were looking for." He attributed the alpha waves to intense focus, but I later realized it was probably more associated with the fact that I'd trained my brain to relax when I started musicking that specific song. Unintentionally, I had just validated the personal effectiveness of my anxiety-dispelling technique. At least, I think that's what happened. If covid hadn't shut down the EEG lab a couple weeks later, I would have loved to pursue the hypothesis.

Enough about fear for now...let's shift over to bravery.

We are told that courage doesn't exist without fear. In fact, courage is the ability to respond to fear, often in a way that faces the source of fear head on. Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear." This is why a parent may run into a burning house to try to save their child or why a teenager comes out as gay to his parents or one of my hesitant piano students decided he would play in the studio recital because his grandma would be there and he wanted to make his grandma proud.

Over the last few weeks as I was preparing this service, I stumbled on an article about James Meredith. James Meredith is most famous for being the first Black student admitted to the University of Mississippi—which had previously been racially segregated. His 1962 admission into the university ignited the Ole Miss riot which required over 30,000 American servicemen to put a stop to the violence.

James Meredith is also known for his marches for civil rights. He organized a solo March Against Fear which spanned 220 miles. During his march, he was shot and wounded by a white gunman. Other civil rights organizations and individuals including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., decided to finish his march while Mr. Meredith was recovering in the hospital and more and more people joined in. On June 26, 1966, James Meredith re-joined an estimated 15,000 marchers as they entered Jackson Mississippi. The movement encouraged over 4,000 African American citizens to register to vote and continued to be a catalyst for voter registration and community organization for civil rights.

Bravery is standing up for something you believe in, even if it might be dangerous.

Often, acts of bravery are in the simple things. An infant taking its first steps, only to fall, get up again, repeat. Courage may be walking out your front door every morning. It could be making a choice that may not be pleasant but you know is right. I wanted a poem that could express all this but, to be honest, I struggled to find anything I liked, either that I had written or one written by someone else that I really thought expressed what bravery might look like in today's world. Then I remembered...I'm a music therapist and one of the things I do in my profession is called song analysis and discussion—where we take the lyrics of a song, which are essentially a poem, and

consider how we might relate to them. One of my favorite courage songs was right there on my Spotify playlist. The lyrics to “Courage to Change” by Sia read:

World, I want to leave you better
I want my life to matter
I am afraid I have no purpose here
I watch the news on TV
Abandon myself daily
I am afraid to let you see the real me
Rain it falls, rain it falls
Pouring on me
And the rain it falls, rain it falls
Sowing the seeds of love and hope, love and hope
We don't have to stay here, stuck in the weeds
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change today?
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything

As Sia alludes to there in the bridge, bravery doesn't mean doing things on your own. More often than not, something worth doing yourself is also worth it to those who love and support you. Frodo Baggins would have probably never made it to Mount Doom without his loyal friend, Samwise Gamgee. And would Captain Kirk have been able to go where no man had gone before without the advice and companionship of Spock and McCoy? My studio recital was a few weeks ago and it really is an exercise in courage for students. Performance anxiety is such a real thing that even some professionals take benzodiazepines before going on stage. Most of my students performing (if not all of them) had invited their family or friends to come along for support. One of my adult students was so terrified of performing that we planned that 1) she could back out at any point including up to the seconds before performing, and 2) I would sit on stage next to her, for moral support. She did it! I was immensely proud of her because I knew what a hard thing it had been. If public speaking is the number one fear ranked in most people, music performances are right up there. It can be worse for adults and older children because, unlike 3-5 year olds who are still developing what is called theory of mind, or the ability to see themselves from others' perspectives, older musicians are much

more prone to the harassment of the perfectionism monster and the negative self-talk monster and the do-it-right-or-you-let-everyone-down monster.

I, myself, am all too familiar with those monsters. The fear of letting people down, including myself. For a long time, I insisted on coping on my own, not realizing that it's okay to ask for help, or possibly because I didn't know how to ask for help for something I didn't understand. Whilst attending the University of Wyoming in 2013, I was struggling so hard with mental health that, for the first time in my academic life, I was failing classes and my GPA dropped to a 2.0. Even though my major was English Literature at the time, I was on a music scholarship, meaning I was required to take piano instruction, be in ensembles, and play a jury, which is music department lingo for playing a solo to be judged by your professors. Problem was, every time I tried to practice, I'd be unable to get more than a few minutes in before the perfectionism monster took over and I'd run away. Even in lessons, I never got more than a few lines in before my well-meaning professor would nitpick everything from rhythmic integrity to tone quality and technique.

As a result, I had only prepared the first page of a 7-page piece for my jury and had no hope of learning the rest in time. I mentioned before that my response to fear is most often flight. While I didn't physically run away (although I considered the possibility), I did attempt to break my hand so I wouldn't have to play. I felt desperate and for some reason, my mind told me that was the solution. The thing about musicians' hands though...all that practice presumably makes those bones stronger than average. I only managed to sprain my hand and it was so minor it healed within a week or so. Meanwhile, I couldn't have practiced even if I'd wanted to. I played the jury with what little I had prepared and scraped by on a D—the lowest mark I'd ever received in a music class. After that semester, I dropped out to get the help I needed. I still didn't play piano for nearly 2 years after that incident and it was a difficult journey to re-define my relationship with music and with myself.

Over the course of that journey, I found it cathartic to pour out my soul into poetry, again trying to fit metaphors and images to concepts I found elusive. Many of those hard experiences went onto paper. Once safely contained there, I could stand back and examine them or stuff them away into one of hundreds of notebooks to be visited later. In preparing for this service, I went through almost all of them, agonizing over what to share. Some of them are too heavy. Too vulnerable. One was even titled, *Waves*, which is a two-page long poem describing a panic attack and I simply can't get through it without breaking down. So forgive me today if I choose a somewhat milder one. I didn't title this one, and it didn't even have a date on it but if I had to guess, I think I wrote it sometime between 2015-2016.

If I hang upside down
with my head to the ground
and my chin to the sky
then I open my eyes
to a world topsy-turvy
which is better somehow
than the upside life

I've been trapped in for now.

If I look to the stars
reaching out with my arms
slowly starting to spin
I can focus again
Because everything's clearer
when the chaos of outside
meets the chaos of inside
The chaos subsides

But if both of those fail
And I'm left to flail
I can't function or think
for the anxiety
If there's no other outlet
Then the sting of a blade
Is of no consequence
If the fear goes away

It was when writing this poem I must have been starting to realize the function of various harmful behaviors. I finally understood that the function of my self-harm was specifically to dispel anxiety. Physiologically, such an act does release endorphins which can have the effect of calming the mind. But at a cost. Finding alternatives to those behaviors became a main goal for me—one of the reasons I took up running with such vigor. Between that semester I dropped out of the University of Wyoming, 2013 and 2015, I was in and out of clinical settings, seeking help for everything from an eating disorder to self-harm and suicide ideation. In one of the treatment settings I found myself in, I was diagnosed with autism. However, I was bounced between therapists and facilities so much between those 2 years that sometimes I was labeled with autism spectrum disorder, other times with generalized anxiety disorder, and even borderline personality disorder.

Regardless, I don't really care what my label is or was, but it does help to think that the experience of immense uncertainty in the face of life can be typical of an atypical mind. In other words, there was nothing wrong with me. I wasn't broken; I simply worked differently. It can be difficult for anyone to figure out how they fit into the scheme of what society expects of them and to simultaneously cope with feelings of being constantly fearful, always anxious. Fear of people, fear of new things, fear of chaos, fear of life.

Meanwhile, it seems that the world encourages us to simply push aside our fear and march forward regardless. As if we are all soldiers in a battle with all life throws at us. However, a soldier has something to fight for and they don't march blindly into battle, nor are they alone. To successfully transform fear through courage means listening to our fear, finding something worthwhile on the other side, and finding support in others.

Tomorrow marks the anniversary of one of the most horrific and traumatic events in our nation's history. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the twin towers. Something changed for the nation after that day. We were given such a visceral depiction of fear and courage—from those who chose to jump, those firefighters and first responders who never re-emerged, phone calls made to loved ones, and the incomprehensible idea that time must march on and life continues after such tragic loss.

Such an experience shapes not only the individuals directly affected, but all of society. In fact, scholars have identified the 9/11 attacks as the start of increased interest in depictions of serial-killers, villains and true crime related content in popular media. They notice that much of the content focuses on trying to understand the killer as a person. It makes sense that people would try to fathom what may often feel like senseless, violent attacks. This speaks to the human capacity for compassion—trying to understand the monster lets us recognize them as more than just a monster. It also helps us feel a little more in control in situations that might arouse fear.

I think most of us here are old enough to remember 9-11? I was only 8 years old, but it's funny how the mind knows what to hold onto. I don't have many detailed childhood memories but the details for September 11 2001 are so clear that I wrote about them a few years ago—another poem.

September 11, 2001

We were in science class,
learning about motion.

Potential energy.

Kinetic energy.

An announcement screeches over the intercom, then

Kinetic energy:

200 confused elementary school children and teachers

surge down the narrow hallways

to the squeaky-floored gymnasium.

Potential energy

A principal at the podium, standing stiff with worried words in his eyes.

An explanation—there was disaster

Planes crashing

Buildings burning

But far, far from here.

So we needn't be worried or afraid.

Although, the looks in our teachers' eyes told a different story.

A prayer.

A song with hand over heart.

We went home early that day.

We went home

to watch on the television.

I know this is serious
because my family only watches TV on weekends

I know this is serious
because my mom is crying
and she never cries.

“Mommy, why are you sad?”

“All those people died.”

“What people?”

“There were people in the buildings. Thousands.”

“Oh.”

I went off and played cowboys with my brother.

That day, a seed had been planted.

Potential energy.

12 years later,

watching Superman
crash through buildings
on a screen

All I can think is, “All those people. There were people in the buildings.”

Today, I watch the footage

that an 8-year-old couldn't fathom.

And finally

feel tears sting my eyes.

As a 3rd grader, I had no foundation for what was happening and, to me, 9-11 was just images on a screen. I didn't feel sad or upset at the time. I want to say that I felt concern for the adults around me, who all seemed extremely distraught over the events. In fact, it was one of the first and only times as a child that I observed my otherwise strong and stoic mother give way to tears. Now, as an adult, I do feel intense sadness watching old footage. I suppose it's life experience—having more solid concepts of life and death. Of peace and violence. Of fear and courage.

It is fascinating to watch how fear shifts and changes. How it evolves for the individual, for society, for the human race. I heard someone say once that emotions, even the unpleasant ones, are simply messages. Maybe it's just like regular mail. If we ignore them, they clutter up the mailbox until it either explodes or overflows. Every now and then we have to go through our mail, sort out the junk, and respond to the legitimate. Every once in a while, we gotta press that button—everything is A-ok. Or even if it's not and we need help, that's okay.

Closing words:

Fear

By Kahlil Gibran

It is said that before entering the sea

a river trembles with fear.

She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.

And in front of her,
she sees an ocean so vast,
that to enter
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.

But there is no other way.
The river can not go back.

Nobody can go back.
To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that's where the river will know
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.