

The shadow side: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33

Fear rules the emotions of Joseph's brothers and strikes the hearts of Jesus' disciples.

by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

"Fear," writes Karl Barth, "is the anticipation of a supposedly certain defeat." This is what rules the emotions of Joseph's brothers, who fear and hate their brother's favored status. This is what strikes the hearts of Jesus' disciples when they see him walking toward them on the water. And this is how it is with us. There is so much we come to fear over the course of a lifetime, so much we suppose will defeat us, that we make life an exercise in securing ourselves against our insecurities.

From the beginning, what one of us did not fear the dark, supposing certain defeat awaited us as the lights went out? Annie Dillard writes about a strange light that swept across her bedroom wall, hour after hour and night after night. "When I was five," she wrote, "I would not go to bed willingly because something came into my room. This was a private matter between me and it. If I spoke of it, it would kill me. . . I dared not blink or breathe; I tried to hush my whooping blood." Then one night she figured out that the windshield of a passing car was reflecting the corner streetlights outside. "Figuring it out," she says, "was as memorable as the . . . thing itself. Figuring it out was a long and forced ascent to the very rim of being, to the membrane of skin that both separates and connects the inner life and the outer world."

There are fears that seem to have been in our bones from birth, fears that shape our lives by the shadow they cast. The fear of certain defeat in relationships keeps us from intimacy. The fear of certain defeat in family relationships keeps us from confronting a parent or comforting a child or speaking our heart. The fear of failing in a job burdens us in our work and makes us unable to break free. These fears define the person we are and deny the person we want to become. They defeat us day in and day out.

Other fears are external. They hold us hostage, silence us and dismantle our humanity. “The first time he hit me I was 19,” says Anna Quindlen’s main character in *Black and Blue*. “I can hear his voice now, so persuasive, so low and yet somehow so strong, making me understand once again that I am all wrong. Frannie, Frannie, Fran, he says. . . . How huge was his rage. It was like a twister cloud; it rose suddenly from nothing into a moving thing that blew the roof off, black and strong.”

Our world seems to be ordered by way of power and powerlessness, by way of the bullies and the beaten. So it must have been for Matthew Shepard in a Wyoming wilderness. So it surely was for James Byrd as he was dragged to his death. So it continues to be for spouses who are certain they deserve the beating they regularly receive, or children waiting to be assaulted by an adult caretaker. Fear begins to control lives when it insidiously possesses the life of the person who dominates with violence, or a community of those who exclude, abuse, exterminate and hate.

“Hatred,” wrote C. S. Lewis’s *Screwtape to Wormwood*, “is often the compensation by which a frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of Fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate.” The darkest fear of all, the fear that has the power not only to shape a life for death-dealing, but also to distort an entire community, is the fear that lurks beneath the pretense of power and privilege, the fear which crouches behind the doorways of prejudice and preys upon the least of these. It is often a righteous fear, justified in the name of a greater Power who has, according to us, willed our dominant hold on the present order.

“Others become scapegoats,” writes Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, “concocted from our own shadows as repositories for our sins and weaknesses [and fears] so we can relish the illusion of our sinlessness and strength.” We exclude, Volf implies, because we are fearful of “anything that blurs our boundaries, disturbs our identities and disarranges our symbolic cultural maps. Others strike us like objects that are ‘out of place,’ like ‘dirt’ that needs to be removed in order to return the sense of propriety to our world.”

This is how fear shapes a human life, distorts the human community and denies another person the humanity revealed by One whose power was made perfect in weakness.

So we leave the story of Joseph's brothers, whose jealous fear of their brother led them to ditch him in the wilderness, and turn to the disciples, whose fears of the storm pale before their terror of the One who shows up to save them. "Only here," says Karl Barth, "is it really worthwhile to be afraid. Here hearts and reins are tried. Here the question is awe and not agitation. Here no one can escape and no one can console himself. Having reached the ultimate limit of all that we fear, where God is revealed to us, we are no longer afraid of this or the next thing, but of Him alone."

Augustine suggests that we respond to our fears with prayer. We are to ask God to watch over us while we are on our life voyage. "Remember such as lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble and temptations," he prays. "Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide."