

Fear, anxiety, and Christian community

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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If you grew up in conservative Christianity, as I did, you might be able to identify psychological trauma that religion caused. I've been writing a book on religious wounds and healing, and it's been interesting to mine my past, even when I'm upturning tragedy. I often gravitate toward things that happened during my youth. I remember the fear tactics that were used. Southern Baptists are known for their fire and damnation sermons. I can recall many oratory masterpieces—detailed descriptions of weeping and gnashing teeth, followed by calls to the altar.

Now, as a preacher, who has pastored youth, is a parent to a teen, and has spoken at Youth camps, I'm rather horrified by the memories. I see them as a chance for the speaker to manipulate young minds so that the preacher would seem more successful. Perhaps they were hoping to spark a revival, like Jonathan Edwards reminding us that we're "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

As teens, we were instructed by Campus Crusade for Christ to ask, "If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?" We hoped that our friends would become afraid of hell and repeat the sinner's prayer after us. (For what it's worth, using "crusade" as a metaphor for evangelism freaked me out, even in my most fundamentalist years.)

The fear worked particularly well on me. I always invited Jesus in my heart and got born again again, because the sermons and tactics made me think that God's anger far outweighed God's love.

Of course, preachers weren't the only ones using fear as a strategy to manipulate teenagers. Smashed cars of drunk drivers would end up on campuses to scare us out of getting behind the wheel after drinking. AIDS mythology abounded, to frighten us from promiscuity or "homosexual behavior." We watched that egg frying in a pan, while the disembodied voice-over warned, "This is your brain on drugs."

Perhaps the fear worked in some cases, but [this New York Times article](#) made me realize the particular damage that we cause to teens when we use fear as a motivation or manipulation. The author explains the neurology of teens, and it seems that the part of the brain that produces fear and anxiety develops far quicker than other parts. So, teens are often walking around like fear factories, but they don't have access to the usual reasoning that quells fear (i.e., as adults we can often remind ourselves that our fears are unwarranted or illogical).

Using fear, when it is already untamed in a person's mind seems (at the least) irresponsible, and (at its worst) close to torture. It can be a very traumatic experience when the adults, who are in charge of your spiritual health, exaggerate that fear in order to manipulate you.

So, as spiritual leaders who work with teens and the parents of teens, what can we do? What can we do when we work with adults who have experienced religious trauma as teens?

With this neurological understanding, we realize that much of the behavior teens exhibit have to do with fear. It makes sense. Chemical abuse can develop with social anxiety. Religious trauma can occur when people are exposed to a vengeful God in these critical years. Wanting to fight or withdraw are natural consequences to fear. But we can begin to create an atmosphere that models how to handle fear in a healthy manner. What would that look like?

Repeating prayers and liturgies that reverberate with the love of God. I

grew up with the scary and homophobic [Awesome God](#), so I'm particularly thankful for Iona and Taizé, which has given us beautiful, soaring prayers. Often my Presbyterian colleagues and church members will roll their eyes at the repetition of chants. They find them bo-ring and would rather have the theological poetry of a five stanza hymn with no chorus.

But there is a reason chanting is an important part of our history and tradition. On that neurological level, it helps us to rewire our brains. Fear causes us to ruminate and obsess. We begin to think about our fears until they create grooves in our soul, roads that we quickly gravitate toward. Repeated liturgy and prayer allows us to create new grooves, it trains our minds to think of the mercy of God rather than our anxieties. That's why we learn Psalm 23 and "Amazing Grace." That's why we turn to them when we're afraid.

Using all the senses. In recent years, Protestants have been using prayer stations, drawing on the important traditions that our Roman Catholic friends have kept alive. We are learning how to light candles, appreciate icons, and use beads. Anointing oils and prayer rocks have become a more common part of our worship—even in historically iconoclast churches.

Being able to smell, touch, hear, sing, and taste the love of God reinforces our sense of safety. Think of that blanket or stuffed animal that made you feel safe when you were little. Having something tangible to grasp on to is still an important part of being able to process fear and anxiety—no matter how old you are.

Providing spaces for people to talk. The article explains that medication and cognitive behavioral treatments don't often work with teens, but therapy does. Of course, we don't engage in therapeutic sessions as church leaders. But we can provide spaces for people to talk. We can open our doors to twelve-step programs. We can be with people as they cry. We can listen to the same story, even when we hear it repeatedly.

When a person recalls a memory to someone who is loving and caring, then that memory becomes bathed with that love and care. Even when we cannot provide therapy, we can receive those stories with compassion.

Americans suffer from anxiety in vast numbers. As spiritual leaders, we need to always be aware of the times when we exacerbate fear and learn to create places of healing, particularly for our youth.

(If you're interested in reading more about this, I have gleaned a great deal from [Serene Jones](#), [Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman](#), and conversations with [Curt Thompson](#).)