

To avoid risk, don't get close to God

Sometimes faith is like encountering a grizzly bear.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue

At the Grand Teton National Park Visitor Center, my wife and I listened to Rick leading an outdoor presentation for park visitors. He had on the sand-colored Stetson hat and gray shirt with the arrowhead-shaped emblem patch that gives park rangers their look.

Across a gigantic boulder in front of him Rick had draped a grizzly bear skin. He was explaining how to deal with grizzlies in the event that we should encounter one while hiking. This is not a scene we are used to in Iowa. There we have squirrels, and nobody gives talks about how dangerous they are.

After providing standard advice about hiking together and making plenty of noise, Rick turned to the bear spray clipped to his belt. "You'll want to use this with care," he said. "Always make sure to take the wind into account." I imagine that, were I face to face with a grizzly, I'd be thinking more about my grave than the wind. But, point well taken: it's bear spray, not self-spray.

Rick continued, "You'll want to spray this toward the bear, but not when the bear is too far away. Wait until she is 30 feet away so that the cloud of mist doesn't dissipate too soon." I carry energy bars when I hike, not a tape measure. And who in their right mind would actually wait for a bear to get sufficiently close? But Rick knows more than I do. I kept listening.

"Bear spray is 99 percent effective," he said. My mind immediately went to the 1 percent and how researchers might have arrived at that statistic. "In the event that the spray fails you, you'll want to lie face down on the ground and play dead. Plant your face in the dirt with hands on your neck, legs spread slightly." By the way, if you don't know the definition of *vulnerable*, this is it.

“Oh, and if you have a backpack, keep it on. It creates more distance between you and the bear.” I couldn’t help thinking of those energy bars. Why would I want food within three miles of my body with a bear breathing down my neck? But, hey, Rick is wearing that Stetson hat, and he has 30 years of experience I don’t have.

The more Rick spoke, the plainer it became: risk is inevitable if you want to get close to nature. If you’re risk averse, keep your distance. Sightsee from your car. Study wild animals in a magazine.

When I reflected later on this obvious truth, it struck me that the same reality holds true for our relationship with God. If you want to get close to the Lord, there are risks involved. You become part of a people who don’t look exactly like you and whose company may unsettle you. You throw your money behind causes larger than your next Amazon purchase. You take to heart Jesus’ mandate about feeding kids who don’t ask to be hungry.

If you want to avoid the risks associated with getting close to the Lord, keep your distance. You can choose to talk *about* God, which is what a lot of religions and pledges of allegiance do. If you want to get close to the Lord, prepare for some vulnerability, and be open to letting faith splay you wide open. Risky as loving this One may be, it’s our only way of getting near to the grace and mercy we so desperately need.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Getting close is risky.”