

Homeland insecurity: Christians and the fear factor

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

When I told my family less than a year ago that I was going to move to Chicago to work for the Christian Century, one family member protested. She was concerned, in the aftermath of 9/11, about me working in a downtown location where, she feared, terrorists might strike next.

I had already wondered, in fact, about what would happen if terrorists struck the Sears Tower. Would it topple over and land on the Monroe Building where the Century offices are located? My wife and I had discussed these and other prospects in making our decision, and we came to the conclusion that we would choose not to live our lives in such a state of fear. That was a choice—and an ongoing struggle.

“Don’t worry about things that might never happen,” I once read when I was fretting about something. That’s great advice. But it’s easier said than done.

There is much in the world to be genuinely fearful about: Saddam Hussein might unleash weapons of mass destruction; the U.S. economy might collapse, sending the world into a prolonged depression; my assets might dwindle to nothing, leaving nothing for retirement; my children might not have faith; someone might abduct my beloved three-year-old granddaughter and do unthinkable things to her.

When I consider all that makes me anxious, it seems like there’s no end to the list. What does this say about me? That I’m an anxious, neurotic soul?

If we do an inventory of our fears, we can learn something about ourselves. What is the source of my fears? Is it something from my past? Is there a pattern to the things I worry about? Are my fears part of a neurotic effort to control events—or to control the demons within?

Sometimes our fears do say more about us than they do the objects of our anxieties. They even reveal to us how we view the world. Where we see danger or evil lurking in the world frames our worldview. Some of our fears are irrational—phobias, we call

them. Some of our fears are misdiagnosed: what really makes us fearful isn't what we think it is. And sometimes how we respond to our fears only makes matters worse.

On the 9/11 anniversary we might also ask: Is the world now more dangerous than it was a year ago? Or are we simply more aware of the dangers in light of the terrorist attacks? Being more aware of the dangers might itself make the world less dangerous—or more dangerous, depending upon how we respond to these threats. As James Carroll put it (in the *Boston Globe*): “The surest way to make the world an even more dangerous place is to posit danger as the most important thing about it.”

One lesson we should have learned is that peace for us is highly unlikely unless and until there is peace, with justice, for all. To paraphrase the prophet Jeremiah: Seek the peace of the world, for in its peace will you find your peace. Jeremiah was really advocating an enlightened form of self-interest, but it is a hard lesson to learn. Rather than peace and justice for all, we seek instead safety and security for ourselves.

Once, when I was a pastor, I was part of a group exercise with the church elders in which we were asked to share something about which we were anxious. The request itself made me anxious. Could I expose myself this way with my elders—my bosses, essentially? But each person did share something, including myself, and what we shared then became grist for prayer together.

This turned out to be such a powerful, healing experience for all involved that I shared it the following Sunday with the whole congregation. I asked them, Shouldn't the church be a place where we can be open about our anxieties with each other? Shouldn't we be able to support one another in the burdens that these anxieties impose upon us? If we can deal with our own fears constructively, then the Christian community could be what family systems theorists call a “nonanxious presence,” a calming influence in a very fearful and anxious world.

Christians are called not to live their lives in fear. We've not yet arrived at a place called “trust,” but with the help of God we're headed in the right direction.