



Resources for Meeting Fear with Compassion and Wisdom

Guided Meditation¹

Bring your awareness to focus on something in your life that is changing or ending or dying right now. Breathe gently as you consider whatever transition is most significant right now in your life. Note any feelings that arise—trepidation, excitement, resistance, anger, annoyance, or grief. Every time your feelings get the better of you, become aware of your breathing. Meet your troubled and contracted feelings with your calm and expansive breath. Breathe, sigh, and stretch out on the river of change. Remember times when you resisted change in the past. Regard how things turned out in the end—maybe not how you thought they would, or you wanted them to, but in the end, there you were. Wiser, stronger, still alive. Tip your hat to the poignancy of death and the promise of rebirth. Smile, relax. Allow yourself to break open. Sit tall, with dignity and patience, watching your breath rise and fall, rise and fall. Pray for the courage to welcome this new change with openness and wisdom.

Then open your eyes, go back into your life, and do what you have to do, but do it with grace, with hope, and with a lighter touch.

Exercise: Meeting Fear with Compassion and Wisdom

This exercise is useful for a group of people who will be available to sit with the community's fears. First, consider this background on practicing "compassionate awareness":

1. Elizabeth Lesser, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow* (New York: Villard Books, 2004) 23.

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1. The first and most important response is simply to listen attentively and non-judgmentally to people's concerns—as an individual and as a community.
 2. Then help people to build compassionate awareness of their own fears, listening and holding their anxiety and resistance without judgment or guilt. Prompts like these will help:
 - “Why do you believe that is the case?”
 - “How long have you felt that?”
 - “What has it been like to feel that?”
 - “Thank you for telling me about it. I value your story and will hold it with you.”
 3. After a person has shared fully, you may respond by “telling a new story” to the fear. This does not deny the reality of fear. Rather, you are presenting a fuller picture of reality to hold next to what remains a legitimate fear or anxiety (if only to the person who feels it). Consider these various ways of telling that new story, putting the fear into perspective and preparing a person to keep moving toward transformation:
 - a. Share your own experience with a similar fear—particularly a fear of some marginalized group (including your own group) or of some coming change—along with what it taught you, and how you learned to sit with it, honor it or move ahead in spite of it.
 - b. Invite the person to reconnect with the dream of God—whatever vision it is that inspires them to welcome The Other and becoming God's radically welcoming people.
 - c. Draw on the resources of your shared tradition—scriptures, theologians, church history, common prayers, etc.—to hold out an alternative reality.

To practice offering this support in your community, gather your group. Two participants pair off in the center of the circle, while the rest of the group witnesses. One person will share one of the fears from “The Sound of Fear” (see handout in the Online Companion). Meanwhile, the partner will:

1. Listen attentively and actively
2. Respond to the fear with compassionate awareness (“Tell me more.” “Why do you feel that?” “Has anything happened to convince you of that?”)
3. Speak to the fear by doing one or several of the following:
 - a. Share your own experience with a similar fear, what it taught you, and how you learned to honor it without being paralyzed by it (“I remember when . . .”)
 - b. Invite the person to reconnect with the dream of God (“Imagine if . . .”)
 - c. Draw on the resources of your shared tradition (“As Christians, we . . .”)

[If you're stumped, you might consult the examples of compassionate listening and responses to fear, on pages 145–147 of *Radical Welcome*.]

At the end of each dyad, the two participants should reflect on the experience. What was most difficult for both parties? Did the person expressing the fear feel heard, or like he or she was being lectured and fixed?

Those who witnessed should reflect on what they saw and heard. What parts of the response were effective? What would they add or do differently?

When the reflection is complete, keep working your way through the list of statements associated with fear, one dyad at a time.