

**Love Meets the Dragon**  
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
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*There is a story of two Jewish men in Poland. One, Mottel, spoke Polish, had friends in government – he was a successful man. His friend, Yitzchak, did not travel in the same circles – was a small-town Yiddish speaking fellow. Now it happened that these men were both concerned about a law that the Polish officials were planning to pass – a law that would undermine the ability of the Jewish communities to use their Rabbis to solve, using Jewish law, matters that they had traditionally dealt with. As they considered this matter, understanding that it would threaten the Jewish community, Yitzchak suggested that Mottel use his connections, and approach the Polish official who was proposing the new law, urging him to withdraw it.*

*Mottel was terrified and protested, “Do you know what you are asking? This official hates Jews, and it has been said he’ll will kill anyone who challenges him on this. To go to him would be fruitless, and it would mean certain death!”*

*Yitzchak listened and then asked his friend, “Do you think that when Moses went to Pharaoh to demand freedom for the Hebrew slaves that he was afraid?”*

*“Of course he was,” came the reply.*

*“Exactly” Yitzchak responded. “He was afraid Pharaoh would kill him.*

*But when we read the story of Moses, we read that God said to him, ‘Come to Pharaoh’.*

*“At first”, Yitzchak said, “When I studied this passage, I thought it odd that the text didn’t say ‘Go to Pharaoh’... but God knew that Moses would be afraid, and so said, ‘Come to Pharaoh’, as if he was saying, ‘I will be with you, come to Pharaoh with me. I will be with you.’ My friend, I am not suggesting you go alone to meet with the Polish authorities, but rather you go, with God, to speak on our behalf.”*

Recently I read something, and it stopped me in my tracks. “If you are a card-carrying human being you share the same fears as everyone else, of losing love and connection to others” After I got over my fear of not remembering where I had put my human card – I couldn’t find it in my wallet, alongside the 5 million other cards stuffed in there – I thought about it, and found myself agreeing. When I think about the moments in my life when fear was so intense it crossed over the threshold to dread, and when I think about the moments, I know about your lives, when the same thing has happened, that is, at the heart of it, isn’t it. The thought or reality of losing love and connection is where deep,

deep fear lives. You've felt it, haven't you? The drop kick, not sure how you can breathe, not sure how you can stand, not sure how you can live, fear, that comes when you think something is happening that will break your heart, or when your heart does in fact shatter, and yet somehow miraculously keeps on beating. You've felt it, the fear of standing toe to toe with a fire breathing dragon. Fear so intense it burns. I've felt it. I've felt it when my phone rang at 7 a.m. In my world phones ringing before 7 a.m. and after 11 p.m. are NEVER a good thing. The phone rang. As I moved to pick it up, I stared at it, as if to see in it, some hint of what was coming. I gulped, tried to breathe normally, tried to ignore the sudden knot in my gut and wiped the sweat off of my palms – and I answered the phone. This has happened to me more than once, and I confess that on a few, occasions, I've been less than gracious with the poor early-rising, wrong-number-dialing person on the other end. And on other occasions, I've heard and seen myself, as if I were separate from myself. I've seen myself nod, pupils dilated, and I've heard myself whisper 'oh God, no' or 'What can I do' or 'Where'. This fear is the one that comes with being human, the fear that is guaranteed, there, in fine print, on the back of your human card. Have you felt it? Fear is at times so painful that we assume it is undesirable. Self-help books are full of advice on this. People are making big money telling us that fear is a bad thing. Platitudes about fear, quick to remind us that fear is, at its core, a human weakness, are everywhere. Here are a just two; "What you believe is very powerful. If you have toxic emotions of fear, guilt and depression, it is because you have wrong thinking", "I've erased the word 'fear' from my vocabulary, and I think when you erase fear, you can't fail". That simple, eh? Just stop being afraid and you'll be a winner. If you are afraid, it is certain proof that you are flawed.

There are authors and gurus and bloggers who are happier to tell us that fear is our fault, than they are to tell us how to live with it. If only people, if only we were smart enough or motivated enough or self-actualized enough we'd let go of fear and it would like a child's soap bubble, just pop! Yet, when can get past the self-help hype and take a longer view of human and pre-human history, we can conclude fear is not a bad thing! Fear of sabre tooth tigers seems, to me, to have been quite reasonable and quite adaptable. Being frightened of the things that go bump in the night, when those things might be eyeing you up as dinner material, seems smart, not weak. Fear of loss, when life is fragile and tentative and when we need people on our side, and when our chances of survival are better when we're together seems, to me at least, a far cry from wrong-headed. To survive, our species has relied on fear. Our species has needed it to help us assess the strange and the unknown. Old maps sometimes had dragons drawn on the edge of them, to warn travelers of the dangers of stepping into unknown lands. Fire breathing, flying reptiles were symbols for the dangers found on the edge of the known. As if we really need the warning. Dragons or not, travelling to strange places, wasn't something that was easily or lightly done. Fear has, throughout human history and heck throughout my history, been a helpful companion. Fear has helped me

understand that those waves were too high, that road was too icy, that this illness needed attention and that not all dragons are mythical. Fear has helped keep me safe, helped keep family safe. Fear, I can't help but conclude, gets a bad rap! But wait, if I let fear be my first teacher, the loudest voice, all the time, I'd be in trouble. I might be alive, but I'd also most certainly be in trouble. How could I, how could you, dare to swing those legs around each morning, how could you dare to get out of bed? If I let fear have its way, both of my daughters, now fully adult, might be safely locked in the basement, kept away from the real and imagined dangers that have been part of this mother's imagination. If fear were the only guidance system I wonder if I'd have ever learned to drive, to go to school, to apply for a new job, to embark on the road to ministry, or even to love. Because all of those things, each decision I've ever made to engage with life, while not made hastily or with abandon, has as it turns out, been scary, it has had the potential to hurt me, to cut me to my core, to take away what I love, to take away the connections that help me define myself, to help me find meaning.

What about you? I bet each one of you has found yourself looking up into the face of the dragon. How shall we then reconcile the reality, that we live with fear, and with the knowledge that if are to truly live, we must find a way to dare; dare to live, dare to love, dare to dream – even though there are days when the possibility of loss and longing seems so overwhelming? How do we even imagine starting a new day, when the inevitable path we take will lead us right up to the very mouth of the dragon's cave. Fear is natural. There are times when it renders us paralyzed, there are times when we can't imagine how we'll get through, or beyond or how we will survive it. But I know that the times in my life when I've managed to move forward in spite of my fears; my fear of failure, fear of success, fear of starting, fear of loss, fear of pain or even fear of fear – that I have managed to do so, because I have understood, as Yitzchak reflected, - because I've understood, in my terms, who or what was inviting me, 'to come to Pharaoh. I have dared to step forward into the unknown, to step forward to the edge of the cliff, to the mouth of the dragon's cave when I knew who I travelled with, who loved me, who had my back and with what greater purpose or entity I was aligned with. "Who do you come with?" I don't imagine you'd answer the question in the same way I would. I believe we've each got to figure this one out on our own. Sorry, no 'one size fits all' answer from me. But I have some hunches. What do you feel most connected to? What gives your life meaning? Where is, 'the home of your soul'. And when we find that something – that sense of who we are, where we belong, an understanding of our place in the world, in the wonder – we will have found, I think, at least the start of the answer to the question, "Who do you come with". What makes it possible for you, as an individual, or us, collectively to do the next scary thing, to steady our breathing, and to move forward even when our primitive brain is yelling "STOP"?

As I've thought about my personal answer to the question, 'who do you go with', I realized that my answer is fundamentally a simple one. For me, the answer has always been some version of a single word, "LOVE". I've dared to let my children venture into the world, because I love them and I love the potential they embodied. I've dared to find my way back into right relationship with my spouse, with my parents, with my friends, with myself, when I've been hurt and afraid of being hurt, because of love. When Gary & I have lost jobs, when illness and great losses have befallen our family, when we didn't know how things would turn out, love has come with me. Love has prevented me from climbing into bed and staying there. Love of community and the potential of our Unitarian Universalist tradition challenged me to face the fears that accompanied my decision, at age 50 to become a minister. Love has accompanied me, has come with me, when I was afraid. There have been of course, times when I couldn't, at least not at first, remember that I had love with me. The fear has at times been so great, that other possibilities have been hard, almost impossible to see. But I've been lucky. When I get it right, it is because I go with love. And so, I ask again, "Who do you go with" – you personally. What made it possible for you to get out of bed and be part of this congregation today? I said that I realized my response was simple, but it isn't easy – they aren't the same thing. And I know that not all endings are happily ever after. The fire breathing dragon of fear can be more than we can face. And certainly, it is often impossible to face alone. Rallying your ally; whether it be love, or a cause, or god, or any other, doesn't mean that the ending will be a happy one. And yet time and time again, in myths across cultures, people and communities have been able to live in spite of, or alongside dragons; though some have wounds and some singed edges.

So today, when you set forth to face whatever dragons you may meet, dig deep, grab your human card, and remind yourself who you come with ... knowing the answer won't make the journey an easy one, but it may make it possible.