

## “What Would You Do If You Were Not Afraid?”

The costume had been in preparation for weeks –  
The black velvet hat that went low over the ears,  
The glow-in-the-dark plastic fangs,  
The white make-up all over my face,  
The red make-up streaking from my mouth down my chin,  
The long black cape tied around the neck,  
The black belt with the big silver buckle holding up the black jeans,  
The black jeans tucked into calf-high black motorcycle boots,  
And then moving back up above the waist – the long-sleeve,  
While cotton shirt that was normally part of my Catholic School uniform,  
But that I was now using to complete my transformation into Dracule,  
The Vampire of the Night.  
I am ten years old, it is Halloween,  
And it is my mission to make everyone afraid.

*‘I’m off, Mom,’ I say, ‘me and John (best friend)  
Are heading out. I took your pillow-case to hold the candy....’*  
And before she can come after me,  
We are out the door into the black, cool night.  
We work our way up Waterman Ave. and now we’re onto Pershing Street.  
First house – score! A Snickers and two scared kids.  
Second house – score! A bowl full of candy out front with the sign –  
*Please take only two. Yeah, right.*

Third house – a long walkway. Six steps up to the narrow, side-ways porch,

with the door all the way at the end.

Turning around, I realize John is not with me – he’s  
Still back on the sidewalk leaning down tying his shoe.

*“John, Come on!”*

And I walk closer to the door.

No decorations, no lights – just one pumpkin in the corner  
with a circle carved in the center,

And a single candle flame burning inside.

At the door now.

My eyes level with the yellow brass knocker

That, I notice, is in the shape of a knarled fist.

Do I knock? Of, course I do; I’m Dracule, Vampire of the Night.

Knock, knock.

Silence. Knock, knock.

Where is John? *“John, come on!”*

And then I hear the swoosh of feet sliding  
on the other side of the door.

The top lock turns, slowly (ka-chung); the second lock turns, slowly (ka-  
chung).

And I’m thinking and you’re thinking: why has the door been locked?

Am I the first visitor tonight?

And the door - I swear, just like the movies – begins to creak.

CCREEEAAAKKKK!

And as it opens I see into the foyer, a single light-bulb illuminating

The hardwood floors, the umbrella in the corner, the iron radiator...

But no one is there.

Ok, really, where is John?

And then I hear again the swoosh, swoosh of sliding feet,

And a hand curls around the door, revealing long fingernails.

Friends, I am not making this up.

And then the tip of a black hat slowly appears from behind the door,

And then a green nose, and then a green chin,

And then straight black hair,

And then this woman,

this witchy woman turns and looks at me full in the face,

Her black mascara eyes wide, her black lipstick lips grinning,

And she doesn't say a word....

Until from deep below, deep in her belly she releases this ancient,

Piercing laugh,

As she takes from behind her back a bowl and offers me candy.

I would have taken some, I would,

Except that by the time that bowl is offered I am already half-way

Down the porch in a full sprint.

Motorcycle boots thumping,

Heart thumping, velvet hat lifting off my head,

My mouth open in full scream.

Here come those six stairs – never mind, I jump off the top of them all,

Flinging as I do the pillow case full of Snickers and peanut butter cups

And jawbreakers and boxes of Mike's and Ike's.

*"Nate!" yells John. "What's wrong? Where you going?"*

But I'm running too fast to hear;  
 I'm running as fast as I can past the little princesses and Casper the ghosts  
 I had wanted to frighten earlier,  
 On the wings of fear I am running,  
 Running home, tears coming down my face,  
 Running home so scared, running home, up the stairs,  
 Up onto my own porch warm and well-lit,  
 Running home, opening the door,  
 Running home...into the safe, safe arms of my mother.

Years later – an adult now, a parent now, your minister now,  
 more often the comforter than the one who is comforted now -  
 this is what I'm what I'm thinking as I remember this story:  
 how even though we get older and tougher and supposedly more brave,  
 we still, as my daughter reminds me, get 'freaked out.'  
 The difference is that we're better at hiding at, maybe.  
 The difference is that what's scary isn't just what's behind  
 That door,  
 but also what's out there, and what we feel in here (point to chest).

Tell me if this sounds familiar:  
 What is it – 9 days until election day?  
 For all our political divisions did you know  
 that the campaigns have a bi-partisan message?  
 Do you know what it is? Be afraid. Be very afraid.  
 The Republicans want us to be afraid of what four more years of Obama

Will do to the economy and the deficit and your taxes.

And the Democrats want us to be afraid of what four years of Romney

Will do to the middle class and to health care and to the Supreme Court.

Said Nixon many years ago, in what is likely the only time

You will hear him quoted in one of my sermons:

*People don't react to love, they react to fear.*

*They don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true."*

Sound familiar?

And tell me if this rings true:

With Sandy the 'Frankenstorm' bearing down,

With problems great and small bearing down,

Hurricane-ing around us – the environment over there,

The political corruption over here,

The poverty in spirit next door, never mind the appearances,

The worthy causes here and there and everywhere that cry out for

A response, overwhelming us.

With everything bearing down, and us in the center, us in the eye,

One thing I think we fear sometimes is our own power

to make a difference at all.

*Who am I? Maureen read for us earlier.*

*Who am I? What can I do? I'm just one person,*

*One voice, one body.*

*Against all this swirling around, what power do I have?*

Sound familiar?

Weeks ago Jud Wolfskill, who read for us, spoke of his experience

Of coming to church and ‘flopping’ into the pew.  
 I’ve thought a lot since then about that word in reference to us – flopping –  
 And how so many of us who flop into the pews on Sunday  
 Are quietly, maybe even unknowingly afraid –  
 Am I good parent? - gosh, I yell so much!  
 Am I good employee? – boy, I really messed up that last project!  
 Will I get into that school? – man, my SAT’s didn’t go well!  
 Will I have any friends? – jeez, I feel so different than everyone else.  
 What will the doctor say when she calls with the test results tomorrow? –  
 Oh, I really shouldn’t have stayed up all night looking my symptoms  
 Up on the internet; I am so scared.  
 Any of these sound familiar?

And even though it does sound familiar,  
 We should remind ourselves that fear is not always bad.  
 Fear is natural.  
 Fear is what we feel when things real and imagined that threaten us.  
 But sometimes, friends, fear can be paralyzing;  
 Fear can keep us from doing what we must;  
 Fear can keep us from being who are.  
 What would you do if you were not afraid?  
 Not a bad question to ask.  
 What would you do if you were not afraid?

Which brings us, finally, to Moses  
 There at the burning bush, sandals off,  
 Afraid to look.

Sometimes I think we dismiss these characters and stories  
 From the Bible because we think they have nothing to do  
 With us, because we think they are nothing like us.  
 We think Moses and immediately we think Charlton Heston,  
 And booming voices and flowing beards.  
*“Moses? yeah whatever.”*

Maybe it changes things when I tell how unwilling a servant he was,  
 How was there minding his own business, an anonymous,  
 Middle-class shepherd, a cog in the big wheel, and happy enough,  
 When God calls him out of his quiet life to do this big important thing  
 That is leading the people out of slavery.  
 And do you know what Moses says?  
 Maybe this will sound familiar.  
 Fearful, afraid to look, Moses says: *but Lord, who am I?*  
*Who am I? I'm not brilliant, I'm not talented, I'm not real eloquent,*  
*I'm just a shepherd. Who am I?*  
*I'm afraid. Please send someone else.*  
 And do you know what God says? God says, *Moses, never mind.*  
*I will be with your mouth and I will teach you what to say.*  
*You will not be alone.”*

And fortunately for his people, and unfortunately for the pharaoh,  
 Moses got over his fear.  
 He learned what he could do if he was no longer so afraid.

All those years ago in my foyer in the safe arms of my mother,  
 me weeping,

the make-up running down my face,  
I think my mom had Moses in mind.

After I calmed down she whispered into my ear:

*“What do you say we go back to that house and tell the woman  
How she made you feel?”*

And still I remember the look I must have had on my face...

Head shaking vigorously, eyes real big, real, real big,  
mouth in the shape of *“no, no, no...”*

*Send someone else! You talk to her; dad talk to her.*

*Not me! I’m not going. I’m afraid!*

But then my mom’s voice whispering in my ear:

*“Nathan, honey, never mind. I will be with your mouth;*

*I will teach you what to say.*

*You will not be alone.”*

What would you do if you were not afraid?

Or more accurately: what would you do if you were afraid,

And you did not let your fear stop you?

When I took my mother’s hand and opened the door and made

My way back down Waterman Ave. to Pershing St.,

And climbed back those six stairs, hand clenching hand,

And knocked on that door with that brass knarled fist,

And heard the creak again, and this time saw a blonde woman,

Green make-up still smudged up near her ears and her hairline,

Listen to me so soberly and apologize to me so profusely,

I got my first lesson in how to answer these questions.

You have had and are having your lessons, too.  
The life the Holy calls us to is full of pitfalls and dangers,  
Accidents and tragedies.  
But accompanying us in our fears are the voices of all  
Who give us courage in this life, saying: "*never mind,*  
*I am with you; you are not alone.*"

May we know we are all meant to shine.  
May we know that playing small and living in fear does  
Not serve the world.  
May we know that when we let our own light and courage shine,  
We give others the permission to do the same.  
May we know that as we are liberated from our own fear,  
Our presence liberates others.  
What would you do if you were not afraid?  
What would you do if you were not afraid?  
What would you do if you were not afraid?  
Amen.

## First Reading

If you Google the first lines of this reading

It will tell you it was written by Nelson Mandela

For his inauguration speech.

But in proof that you can't believe everything, or even very much,

Of what you read on the internet,

These lines actually come from author Marianne Williamson

In her book "Return to Love."

It will be read by Maureen Gormley:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves: Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel

Insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest of the glory of the divine that is within us.

It's not just some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people

Permission to do the same.

And as we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically

liberates others.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

**Second Reading:**

New folks ask me: do we as UU's read the Bible?

And my answer back to them is not If we read, but How we read,  
Because how we read these words and hear these stories makes all  
The difference.

So a request to hear this next story from Exodus, an ancient book,  
With fresh ears, unadorned with judgment,  
As free of skepticism as you can muster,  
And with an open heart.

Jud Wolfskill will share:

“Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro.  
He led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb,  
Which was known as the mountain of God.  
There an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire  
Out of a bush;  
He looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.  
Then Moses said, *“I must turn aside and look at this great sight,  
And see why the bush is not burned up.”*

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see,  
God called to him out of the bush,  
*‘Moses! Moses!’* And Moses said, *“Here I am.”*  
Then God said, *“Come no closer!  
Remove the sandals from your feet,*

For the place on which you are standing is holy ground.

And he said further, "*I am the God of your father,  
The God of Abraham, and Isaac, and of Jacob.*"

And Moses hid his face, because he was afraid.