



Jumping Over Fear

One of my earliest childhood memories is hiccupping as I was looking out the second story farmhouse bedroom window. My mother, thinking it best to scare the hiccups out of me, without warning pushed me against the windowpane and shouted, “Look, there’s a lion in the yard!” I don’t remember if the hiccups subsided or not, but I do remember seeing the lion. In fact, I can still see that lion in my mind’s eye today. And I remember at age four, rather than feeling fear, I felt the thrill of having such a magnificent creature standing in our Minnesota farmyard looking back at us.

When I was diagnosed with lung cancer, I was unexpectedly pushed against a windowpane again. But this time rather than seeing a lion out my window, I immediately saw all the ferocious creatures already filling the yards of so many people I’ve met over the years at home and abroad. This new lion in my yard seems particularly dwarfish compared to wars, refugee camp living, losing young children to curable diseases, and countless other disasters I witnessed while traveling or studying in places like India, Africa, and Asia.

“But what do you do with YOUR fear?” a friend asked me recently, certain that her reaction to learning she had a terminal illness wouldn’t be so quick to take measure of Phnom Penh orphans or Nairobi street kids. “Do you just jump over your fear?” she offered. I didn’t have any quick and ready answer to her question, but her question set in motion an examination of what I have or have not learned about my own fears over the years.

For starters, I realized I had been raised by a tribe of fearless people. Every man I knew as a child—whether he was an uncle, a neighbor, or my own father—was a farmer. In hindsight, every one of them must have buried his fear of mean cattle, dangerous machinery, and silo asphyxiation deep inside himself before heading out to do his daily farm chores. I witnessed my own father scale 20-story haystacks, tackle ornery two-ton bulls, and stick his bare hand alongside hydraulic hitches to pull out entangled hay baler twine. It didn't seem to matter what potential risk there was or what damage resulted. Rather than stop to question what he was about to do or sit down long enough afterward to make sure all his bones were intact, he just kept going. Time and time again, my father worked with untreated broken collarbones, dislocated shoulders, bleeding gashes on the top of his head, and bruises the size of Baltimore. On our 80-acre farm, fear did not get a say in which jobs got done and which ones were left behind.

The women I was surrounded by as a child were no different. I remember early one winter morning, my mother ran out of the house still in her long flannel nightdress in pursuit of some fast moving steers headed for the county road. When her bedclothes got caught on the barbwire fence she was leaping over, she simply pulled herself off the wire and kept on running, shredded flannel spreading out behind her like steamboat streamers.

My mother, aunts, and neighboring women drove tractors up steep ditches while the men bellowed out directions from behind mud-stuck implements. I heard them share stories about catching attacking roosters, herding angry sows back into pens, and facing down hungry foxes at the henhouse while the men were off in the fields. There were no cell phones back then, and 911 was never designed to help out in cases of farmers' wives' crises. Yet never once, as a child, did I hear these women sound afraid. Instead, these rural women in their 30s and 40s sat upright on their front porches relaying their scrimmages with the enemy like the well trained field generals they were.

“A fool without fear is sometimes wiser than an angel with fear,”

Nancy Astor says in *My Two Countries*. Perhaps the fearless people I knew growing up were fools, but I can see there was some wisdom in their ways as well. I don't know how, while I was growing up, my parents would have reacted had they faced war or serious disease or the death of a child. But I do know, within the perimeters of their own land and while still milking 25 Holstein and Jersey cows twice a day seven days a week for over 60 years and getting the hay crops harvested, they must have made some sort of pact with fear. Perhaps in childhood they had already decided that being angels with fear wasn't for them.

But those were my growing up years, and eventually both my parents did have to face fear. The one time I saw fear in my father's eyes was when he was 78 years old and in the hospital for the first time in his life. Once he was off the familiar grounds of the farm with no pitchfork or shovel to protect himself, his courage quickly slipped away in the struggle to stop the stampede of dying. All I could do was hold his hand and reassure him that this one last chore was something he could also handle.

After my father's death, my 75-year-old mother single-handedly moved herself off the farm and into town. Her strapping young farming nephews were scheduled to come with their trucks, but because she thought the sewing machine head and loaded dresser drawers were "too heavy for the boys to move," she went ahead and did it alone. When they arrived on the day of the planned move, all they could do was laugh at what was left for them to carry—the shells of dressers and a few sticks of furniture too large to fit in my mother's car trunk.

My mother's fears have come out now that I have cancer. She always seems fine with her own dying. Like all good Irishwomen who enjoy the sports page of the obituaries, my mother talks about death as though it were the woman next door—always too late or too early, but sure to show up when least expected. My own dying seems too early to her as well, but as she said to me the other day, "Well, we all have to go sometime, and you're no exception."

I have felt fear in the last two months in new ways, for sure. The night after my diagnosis was the most afraid I have ever been. Suddenly I feared

I'd die too soon, that I wouldn't get everything done I thought any decent dying person should do before departure. I feared I'd be too much of a burden on my sons in the thrashing about business of dying. I was afraid I wouldn't wake up the next morning and would lose the last chance to tell everyone I loved just how much they had meant to me all these years.

But the wisdom of my tribe quickly kicked in. All I had to do was work without regard for my own safety to get done what needed doing. If I was fearful of being a burden on others, there were ways around that, including hiring help and ending my own life. Because I did survive the first night, I set out to make sure everyone knew how grateful I was for their love and companionship—everyone from my two sons to the grocery checkout woman I'd been chatting with for years as I bagged my groceries.

Seneca wrote in his *Epistles*, “If we let things terrify us, life will not be worth living.” Perhaps this sentence best describes the wisdom of those who surrounded me early on. They knew all too well that, if fear rules, the hay will rot, cows will vanish, and attacking roosters will get the upper hand every time. I learned from these fearless people that there are daily decisions that we can make to exercise our muscles against being afraid. Life ends for us all. But if we let death terrify us, not only might we miss our own living, we may also lose out on our dying.

My most recent dream of my father was of him arriving at my house in his old gray Chevrolet. At first I was happy that he was still alive and that his Alzheimer's had gone away, making it possible for him to brave the city traffic to come to my house. But when he told me he had put the car keys up on the outhouse windowsill to pay the parking meter, I knew that only in my dreams could I imagine him alive and fearless again.

The other night my mother dreamed that all the milk cows had gotten out of the pasture and were lost. In order to see where they were headed, she climbed up to the very top of the water tower in the neighboring town. Sitting in her wheelchair inside the nursing home the next morning, she remembered her dream and said, “I guess I'll never be done chasing after runaway cattle!” Even in her dreams, my 85-year-old mother is more fearless than most people I know.

I don't think I jump over fear so much as I ignore fear. Perhaps I simply think that if my parents could wrestle down steers and sheep, I should be able to tackle cancer. Maybe I believe that if so many people for so many years all over the world have had to face pain and suffering and uncertainty, I should at least be able to stare down a diagnosis of adenocarcinoma. And I know my mother was right when she said to me, "You're no exception." I know I am just one more farmer's daughter who learned early on when to grab the legs of a backbiting rooster and where to stand when the bull comes charging.