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START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:01]**

Good morning, Wellspring's. It's good to be with you again today. One of my favorite old George Carlin comedy routines is about slogans that oversimplify complex realities and like many of his best bits that have stood the test of time, it stands right on the edge between kind of mockery and moral clarity. One of those slogans that for me very much belongs in this category is this You may have seen it on T-shirts. You may have seen it as an Internet meme. Pain is just weakness. Leaving the body pain is just weakness, leaving the body that just does a lot of work there.

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And actually, I think that just does a lot of harm because there are certainly circumstances in which pain physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically doesn't have to shut us down and we can develop new strengths.

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But it's not only that. It's that pain is just weakness, leaving the body. If we buy fully into that, it can cause us harm, it can cause other people harm. I know that because I kind of lived within that worldview, not consciously. And it cost me this was a whole bunch of years ago.

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And some of you know that in my early and mid 30s, I was a runner and it was running a race just coming up on God.

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Seventeen years ago, I was thirty three years old, the Space Coast half marathon near Cape Canaveral, Florida. And I was halfway through that race and I was on my way to blowing past my own personal record, my own PR. I was on pace to finish that race at about 155. It's not all that fast, but for me it was fast. But here's the thing. About halfway through, I developed this discomfort in my lower right shin and that discomfort became full on throbbing pain.

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And then it became searing pain. And then it became a stabbing pain. But I continued with that race. I slowed way, way, way down.

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And I did not come anywhere near a sub to our mark. But I finished and after the adrenaline worn off, the pain was so excruciating that I had to crawl to my car a couple of days later and went to the orthopedist and I found out I had a stress fracture that I had run right through and made worse. And here's the kicker. I was not going to be able to run for another at least two months. I don't look back on finishing that race with any sense of personal pride or accomplishment, it was unskillful, it was foolish, and it actually cost me and not listening to my pain, not listening to my body, the opportunity to maybe kind of say, OK, this one didn't work out today, but there are other races and I can take care of myself and I can prepare. By not listening. By saying it was just weakness or something I'd overcome, it cost me so no, pain is not just weakness.

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Leaving the body pain is in no way this is fitting on a T-shirt, I guess. I guess I can try, but pain is a complex, physical, biological, emotional, psychological, spiritual reality, an experience that requires deep listening and curiosity to what's happening in the body and in our minds, an evaluation of our circumstances, our environment and when necessary, consultation with other people who can help us understand what's going on that doesn't fit on a T-shirt.

[00:03:55]

But it is true. Pain is not just weakness leaving the body, and that's how I want to open to today's new start of this message series, how to be afraid that myself and Reverend Leigh and Rodney and Kathleen will bring you in this

series through the end of the calendar year. And it's right there in the start, right here at the beginning. How to be afraid? Not if we are afraid not. Don't be afraid, but how to be afraid.

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In this series, you'll hear each of us talking about different experiences of fear that are not all the same.

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That's true.

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Not all of us are afraid of the same things or experience fear in the same ways. But fear is a near universal human experience. I think there's only two categories of people who don't experience fear saints and psychopaths, and I'm not even sure about both of them.

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But for most of us, for the vast majority of human beings, fear is not an if. It's it's a when. And so to learn ways of how to be afraid skilfully, helpfully, in a healing way, that's incredibly important, I think, especially given the circumstances that we find ourselves in this life right now with the pandemic that is dragging on and on and will be with us for a while more. In the midst of this election that still has not been conclusively brought to an end, at least not while I'm recording this message and it may not be the case when you hear this message, it looks likely that the Biden Harris ticket will win, but it's not a foregone conclusion yet. Fear has been something that many of us. Have had to grapple with over the last four years the use and abuse of fear, the regular use and abuse of fear of others as different and dangerous and destructive has been a common rhetorical trope. By this administration, but that's not actually what I want to talk about on this Sunday after Election Day. I want to talk about another use and abuse of fear, which is the pathology of fear and the denial of it, kind of like that T-shirt slogan that says pain is just weakness, leaving the body.

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Views of fear that say it is only weakness are not something we should ever listen to or something we should deny or something we should be suspect of, or we should see other people who are afraid as somehow, morally, spiritually less worthy.

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After he survived his own bout with covid-19, and I am glad he survived, I don't want to see anyone die of this disease. My theology does not allow me to believe that it is a violation of our universalism.

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After President Trump survived, he said flat out, don't be afraid of covid-19. And I must firmly disagree, firmly disagree, because I know people who know people who have died.

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And I know people directly who are living as covid long haulers and have had their lives and their health irreparably damaged and harmed because of this disease.

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Learning how to in workable ways be with fear of this pandemic is important.

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On an ongoing way, I know we're all so tired, I mean, a couple of days after the election here, I'm exhausted, I'm tired by the pandemic and I just want to be past it. But just wanting to be it and to stop listening to appropriate ways to have caution and to be aware will only perpetuate it and make it worse for so many other people, especially people who are profoundly vulnerable. Indeed, one of the things that when you study the denial of fear is you see how linked it is with a kind of dehumanizing politics. A politics, you can call it dominating politics or authoritarian regimes, how? The denial of fear is a way that people stop listening to themselves and to each other. I mean, right there in one of, if not the most incisive, insightful books about authoritarianism, 1984. It's not just that in 1984, that fear is used to fear others. It's that the party in nineteen eighty four, it said, actually gets you to mistrust the own signals from your own body. It gets you to mistrust your nervous system. It gets you to mistrust, love and kindness and connection and yes, fear. The pathology of fear leads to profound harm and damage. I don't think the injunction, don't be afraid, is realistic for most of us as human beings. I think the invitation. How can we be with our fear while still holding on to our values, what's important to us, to each other? That this. Is much more realistic and much more likely to be skillful for us.

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And actually, you know, we learned this early in life.

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You know, I don't play in traffic for a reason, I avoid traffic for a reason, that's fear. That's an appropriate use of the human threat system that is there for an evolutionary reason that keeps us alive.

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So what did many of us learn? OK, don't play a traffic. Don't rush out into the street. You could get harmed, have appropriate sense of threat. But as many of us learned and were offered to hold my hand and look both ways before crossing the street. That's an appropriate use of fear. But it is not denying fear, and I got to tell you, in my work as a therapist, it's one of the most profound both challenges and invitation's I find in this work is that so many people. Come to the work of therapeutic healing. Because they have learned or been taught to fear their fear, to have anxiety about their anxiety and then judgment, about their anxiety, about their anxiety and then shame about their judgment, about their anxiety, about their anxiety. And then the problems build and build and build, rather than recognizing that our very nature has equipped us to be afraid and that is not always in appropriate. I would actually say the denial and the pathologies of fear leads to profound harm. Some of you know the name Keith Ranieri. He was the the founder. They had all kinds of weird names for him in this organization called Nexium, which from the outside sounds like a human growth and potential movement. And the truth is, there was not much new in its outward facing presentation about what had helped people do it. But it borrowed didn't come up with anything really new on its own. It borrowed from certain cognitive behavioral therapies and depth psychology and union analysis. It wasn't anything new there, but it did help some people grow and face fears.

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However, if you know the true story of Nexium and Keith Ranieri, you might know that just recently he was sentenced to 130 years in prison for, among other things, racketeering and sex trafficking.

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And I'm not going to get into the details of these things because they are deeply disturbing and traumatizing. I know all this because I watched a documentary about Keith Ranieri and about NXIVM. It's called The Vow. If you want to watch it, you haven't seen it on HBO. It's pretty good. Would have been better at five episodes rather than nine episodes. But that's an aesthetic quibble. That's not important for right now. But one of the things you get from watching these old videos of Keith Ranieri is this particular teaching fear is only your ego and your ego is holding you back. And Nexium exists to help you get past your ego and get past what's holding you back, and if fear is what is leading you to have that defense, the what we need to do is get rid of your fear. This message comes up over and over and over again through the documentary. And you can see how that denial of fear. Allowed Keith Ranieri and some of the other leaders of Nexium to profoundly damagingly abuse other human beings, and especially in terms of Keith's own actions, profoundly cause harm to the women who he had access to. Again, he was convicted of sex trafficking. The documentary makes clear that to deny and pathologies fear on its face, that fear is just ego. Being burned away is a gateway to profound harm. If that was something you want to watch, I encourage it, but not all of us will be able to stomach us, stomach it. And that is all right. What I do want to say is that in learning how to be afraid, rather than denying that sometimes we are afraid, it involves being able to listen to ourselves, our own moral instincts, our own bodies, our own experience, and to connect with other people that we trust.

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That's not what happened in Nexium with Keith Ranieri. I think a better and much more skillful example and a really beautiful one.

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Is from a guy named James Finley, James Findlay, who is one of the core faculty members of Richard Roar's Center for Action and Contemplation.

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Some of you know, Richard, your father or some of us call him a very progressive Franciscan friar and teacher, and James Findlay tells a story writing through the Center for Action and Contemplation about being an 18 year old teenager, very young man who is traumatized by his own authoritarian upbringing, and James Findlay, who found his way into spiritual community, the spiritual community of Thomas Merton, who's a name that some of us might know, the insightful.

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Challenging.

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In some ways, truly visionary spiritual teacher, the 1960s.

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Now James Findlay had an opportunity to work with Thomas Merton as his spiritual adviser when he was a young kind of oblate, a new member of this spiritual community in Kentucky where Thomas Merton was one of the teachers. And he had his first meeting with Thomas Merton and he was terrified, his first spiritual direction session, and he was absolutely terrified. He was hyperventilating. He was having a profound fear reaction because his experience growing up is that anyone who might have had power over him was someone who could cause him harm and damage.

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And so he got into that meeting with Thomas Merton and he had a panic attack and he can barely breathe and he said, I'm so afraid because you're Thomas Merton.

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And Thomas Merton said calmly with an invitation, he said, you know, your job here is to at the at the monastery was to was to work in the pig barn when we meet for spiritual direction.

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All I want you to do is to. Reflect with me on one thing that you learned working in the pig barn every day.

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And that's how we'll start to get to know each other. And James Findlay said. This has allowed him to recognize. That he was just one person. Talking to another person. About the very ordinary things that happen by taking care of the pigs in the pig barn.

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He said what was modeled for him with the great Thomas Merton. Was that there were ways of working with fear? In which Thomas Merton neither invaded him nor abandoned him. And in this way, James Findlay learned what it was not to invade himself when he was afraid.

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And neither to abandon himself when he was afraid. This is how we can be afraid not to invade or abandon. But to be with his skillful presence for kind and compassionate ways. It goes back to a series at WellSpring's many years ago, we called The Power of With. There's this, I think is how we can be afraid to be with the fear in a trusting, loving, kind, curious way. So that the fear neither overtakes us. Nor do we deny. And so that fear becomes workable in the name. And in following our values, what is most important to us?

[00:19:35]

I want to end today with a quote from one of the most skillful spiritual teachers that I know, Sharon Salzberg. I was actually on retreat with her just a couple of months ago. And she has a recasting of what she calls fearlessness. She puts it like this When I think of fearlessness, I actually think that we need to learn. What we need to learn is how to be afraid, how to sit and accommodate that feeling and not run from it and also not be driven by it. Because when we're driven by it, we will do anything to avoid it. We will do things that are quite self-destructive or destructive to others. We will surrender good judgment. And so if we could learn to sit quietly with our fear, surround it with awareness and love, then I think we will discover a whole new meaning, a fearlessness.

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Over the course of this series, I am looking forward to being with you. And with our other preachers, as together we discover a whole new meaning. A fearlessness. Amen, and may you live in Blaesing.

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Would you pray with me?

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Maybe just the first thing we can recognize is the breath. Is the spirit.

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Recognizing that for reasons that make all the sense in the world, one of the first things to go when we are afraid.

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Is that the breath can feel so distant to us and from us? And so maybe in this moment, if it feels safe and accessible for you. You can just notice what the breath is.

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Of how it is to be with your experience, how it is to notice each and breath.

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And each outbreak.

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And in this recognizing that there's a reason that all the ancient spiritual traditions called the spirit and the breath by the same name.

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And so in being with the breath, we also allow ourselves. To return to the foundational parts of who we know ourselves to be. The things that we must trust about ourselves, the values that we most set our hearts upon, the realities that we feel we can safely fall back into even when we don't feel safe.

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May we cultivate fearlessness not by denying fear and not by seeking a workaround from it? But instead, by being able to tenderly tend. And approach our own hearts, our own bodies and our own lives.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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