

Only in prime-time television would fear be presented as competitive entertainment; only in popular culture could it become a mere “factor.” As anyone who has experienced it at a primal level knows, fear is anything but a factor. It envelops, overwhelms, and swallows up. At its most terrifying, fear makes it difficult if not impossible to think straight about anything but its source and its potential consequences. It is telling that phobos, in early antiquity had the meaning of “putting to flight.” When one is in fear, the urge to escape is instinctive before it becomes rational. Fear, then, is an experience that reminds us that we are animals after all. No less than other creatures, the adrenaline rushes, our hearts palpitate, our brows perspire, and we react as we sense a threat to our wellbeing. The neural science and biochemistry behind all of this are highly complex, but the net effect is pretty simple: fear helps us survive.

Beyond survival, fear in some traditions, also had the salutary effect of helping people live moral lives. In Judaism and Christianity, for example, the “fear of God” was every bit as overwhelming, if not more so, than the menace posed by an enemy. Any encounter with God or even an angel invariably frightened people out of their wits. Yet finally, this fear was different. It was rooted in a recognition of God’s holiness and power, which was why it manifested itself for the faithful in awe and reverence. The fear of God was “the beginning of wisdom” and the center of Jewish and Christian piety precisely because it was the path to a right relationship with God. In this way, the fear of God helped one to cope with the more ordinary fears of human existence by relativizing them and giving them a larger cosmic significance.

Needless to say, such a disposition is out of sync with the temper of early twenty-first century America, not least among the religious. In the absence of existential comfort, we have now come to settle for safety, or the pretense of safety. This is partly why we are now so attuned to the calculus of risk—the seven signs of cancer, the five symptoms of depression, the three warning signs of a suicidal teenager; the dangers of high blood pressure, obesity, stress, smoking, fast food, cholesterol, unprotected sex, too much sun, power lines, faulty smoke alarms, radon; the need for air bags, good insurance, a balanced portfolio, a proper retirement plan—and why we need to pay attention to crash test results, the rate of

inflation, the melting of the polar ice caps, and the disappearance of the rain forests. Fear has always been a motive for action but now it is market-tested and packaged to induce us to buy anything that will help us manage risk and control life circumstances.

It is not just the power of the market that has changed our consciousness of fear, but the images from news to entertainment that saturate our imaginations and seep into our dreams. We have seen so much on television and film that we are capable of fixating on dangers that are, by any measure, rare: an encounter with malevolent sharks, rats, or ghosts; falling off of a cliff or being buried alive; a fugitive breaking into our house and holding us at gunpoint; or a stranger kidnapping our child.

And then there is the politics of fear. Both electoral and issue-oriented politics in America have a common discourse and its name is fear. Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, traditionalists and progressives—all employ fear as the weapon of choice in defining their cause, staking a claim, and winning support. Special interest groups, as a matter of course, exaggerate the threat of their adversaries to frighten citizens into giving money to their cause. In the same way, politicians inflate the dangers represented by their opponents to motivate citizens to vote for them. Political consultants on all sides have refined the techniques of fear mongering into an art form. And why not? Such techniques clearly work.

William James wrote in the early twentieth century that, “In civilized life, . . . it has at last become possible for large numbers of people to pass from the cradle to the grave without ever having had a pang of genuine fear.” Wishful thinking if there ever was. Indeed with the events of September 11, 2001, our consciousness of fear took an unexpected turn. All at once, fear became primal for all of us, as it had not been for quite a while. We came to understand that inciting fear has become a global strategy, in this instance aimed at the symbols and substructure of American (and, more broadly, Western) economic, military, and cultural dominance.

Fear in contemporary culture is ubiquitous. It would seem to permeate every aspect of our personal and public lives. In some instances, it is ele-

mental, totalizing, utterly terrifying; in others, marketed and illustrated for us through the media, the entertainment industry, and politics.

This issue of *The Hedgehog Review* is an inquiry into this complex matter. It traces the outline of fear in the past, through the history of political thinking about fear (Corey Robin) and the history of city building (Nan Ellin), and in the present, with special attention to the media (David Altheide), technology (Felicia Song), the commodification of surveillance (David Lyon), risk society (interview with Ulrich Beck), and fear of the other (review of Richard Kearney's book *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*). Through it all we grapple with how we have come to this place, and what we should do with the array of fears that are now a very real part of our lives.

—T.H.R.