



INTRODUCTION

9/11: Reason and Unreason

“Present fears/Are less than horrible imaginings”

Macbeth, Act 1, Scene III

Like virtually everyone in the United States I remember where I was and exactly what I was doing when terrorists flew planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. I was writing poetry in Scotland, housed in Hawthornden Castle, a dank great house on a crag overlooking the wooded valley of the River North Esk outside Edinburgh. I had been awarded a month-long writing residency at Hawthornden, and I'd arrived in Edinburgh at the very end of August 2001. At the time, I feared nothing, and I could not imagine anything more horrible than a writer's block that would lay waste to this gift of a month free to do nothing but write. I had come to Scotland to work on *The Reason/Unreason Project*, a book of poems about the tensions between the rational, scientific world view and the realm of emotional and spiritual understanding. I hoped, at Hawthornden, to get a sense of how people experienced the world before the Age of Enlightenment.

By September 2, I was installed in my small bedroom-study on the second floor of the house built in 1638 by the poet William Drummond on the site of a medieval castle. From my window, I could see the courtyard garden and an edge of the thick masonry walls of the banqueting hall and partially ruined tower of the original structure. For a week, I spent my mornings reading and

writing about the mysterious Picts, said to have lived in the caves under and near Hawthornden, and my afternoons exploring the surrounding countryside and the nearby villages of Lasswade, Polton, and Bonnyrigg.

On the afternoon of September 11, I borrowed one of Hawthornden's clunky Chinese-import bicycles and headed down the bike path to the village of Penicuik to tour the Edinburgh Crystal factory. I returned to the castle shortly before dinner—about noon, New York time. Kerry, the cook, was making biscuits when I went into the kitchen to return the bike lock key. “Did ye hear the news?” she asked, and told me that planes had crashed into the World Trade Center. Maybe she told me about the Pentagon, too. I could barely understand her, partly because her Scots accent was so thick, but mostly because what she was saying was simply incomprehensible. Planes flying into skyscrapers? It didn't make any sense.

Making Sense of Fear

This is a book that tries to make sense of the emotions I felt at that moment, and in the subsequent months and years. It ranges widely, offering a layperson's introduction to the science of fear and anxiety; exploring my experiences as a fearful cancer patient and an anxious long-term cancer survivor; considering the social, political, and psychological roots of the “culture of fear” that surrounds us. It examines other people's strategies for dealing with anxiety, and—although it's not a how-to book—suggests how we can work together to confront and face down our fears.

This isn't a book about terrorism, or about September 11. But it's impossible to write a book about fear and anxiety in the midst of a “war on terror” without acknowledging it as the sea we swim in. And this book did have its genesis in that fearful day; or, more accurately, in my reflections on the political responses to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. President George

W. Bush was hardly the first leader to use fear of an enemy, real or imagined, as a means of rallying political support. His description of our new reality as a war between “good” (us) and “evil” reminded me of my cold war childhood when everything—from the duck-and-cover exercises that had us diving under our grade-school desks to the souped-up physics course I took in high school—was part of the war against communism. And the political manipulation of our perfectly understandable fears of further terrorist attacks resonated with an event that I’d been thinking of writing about for years: the terrifying murders of a college friend and his family in 1985 by an unemployed, homeless man convinced that the United States faced imminent invasion by communist troops.

These days, of course, communism’s the least of our worries, and even the terrible events of 9/11 are receding into history. But we’re still besieged by threats. They dominate TV news, radio talk shows, headline crawls on the Internet; they lurk behind our cell phones’ rings and clog our e-mail “in baskets.” The price of a barrel of oil passes \$100 and continues to climb; so does the cost of your daily commute. Your doctor calls to schedule a repeat mammogram. The weatherman warns of a deadly storm massing off the Atlantic coast. A neighbor, worried about “emergencies,” says you’d better stockpile water and food. The Centers for Disease Control reports that the flu vaccine doesn’t work. A sketchy-looking character gets on the city bus, shrugs off his backpack, and sits down in the next seat. Whatever coded color the government may have posted, our internal warning systems keep us on anxious alert.

But how many of these threats are real? Does it make sense to be scared?

I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what makes sense, and what doesn’t. The problem interests me because of my personal history. My father was orphaned as a very young child; his father abandoned the family when my father was only four, and his mother died of TB four years later. My father was brought up by his aunt and uncle, Orthodox Jews, but as an adolescent, he turned his back on religion. He grew up to be a scientist, an atheist, a staunch

advocate of pure reason who coped with emotional catastrophe by ignoring it.

My father raised me to value rational thought processes and pay scant attention to distressing emotions. Following his example, I ignored, as best I could, my mother's crippling and ultimately fatal illness, my troubled little sisters, even my own difficult adolescence. And like many young women, in my midtwenties I fell in love with a man much like my father: an extremely rational scientist. Unlike my father, my husband abused both alcohol and me. I coped as I had been taught: I ignored how my husband made me feel. Using my highly developed reasoning powers, I constructed endless arguments for staying married. For seventeen years I put up with my husband's put-downs and ignored his drunken verbal, and sometimes physical, attacks. Ultimately, he resorted to violence even I could not ignore. When he gave me a black eye, I finally gathered up my courage, and our two sons, and left. In the years after my divorce, I slowly came to acknowledge and appreciate the emotional, spiritual, and even religious aspects of human existence—the sources of art and of the poetry I started to write soon after I left my husband. Eventually, I wrote a memoir that mapped my emotional journey, *Black Eye: Escaping a Marriage, Writing a Life* (Terrace Books/University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

But I continued to struggle with the tension between the rational and the emotional. Fifteen years after I escaped my husband, in the millennial year 2000, I went to Taos, New Mexico, to write poems about reason and unreason at the provocative conjunction of scientific fortresses (Los Alamos and the Santa Fe Institute) with sites of spiritual importance like the San Ildefonso pueblo and El Santuario de Chimayo. The next year, in a Scottish castle remote from the preoccupations of science and the modern world, I had just begun to write more poems for my manuscript, poems that reflected on the human search for meaningful patterns before the Age of Reason. And then the planes flew into the buildings.

Terrorism 101

“Everyone’s in the drawing room listening to the radio,” Kerry said. This, in itself, spoke to the enormity of the news. At Hawthornden, there was no TV, and silence was the rule from after breakfast until 6:30 PM when we gathered in the Garden Room for sherry before dinner. Each of us residents had been given a tiny transistor radio and cheap earphones which we could use only in the privacy of our own combination bedroom-study.

In the drawing room, Deborah, a novelist from New York, and Maddy, a British poet, sat on the chintz-covered couch staring at a boom box tuned to the BBC. The newscaster, in his plummy British accent, kept describing the horror that had occurred in New York and Washington while I was at the crystal factory. There seemed to be no new news, just the same stories, over and over. I was glad we had no TV. On CNN, I imagined, it would be endless images of collapsing buildings, fire, and smoke.

Deborah, who lived two miles from the World Trade Center, was on the verge of hysteria, worried about her apartment and her friends. At dinner, she and several other residents drank a good deal of wine. After dinner, as usual, we adjourned to the drawing room for coffee. Kristos, a Greek poet, leaned close to me. “Judith,” he slurred. He spoke very softly so Deborah would not hear. “You must know: I feel sad for the people who died. For their families. But deep in my heart of hearts, I must tell you, Judith, in my heart of hearts, the U.S. got what it deserved.”

I excused myself as quickly and politely as I could—no need to add to international tensions, I thought, and besides, Kristos was good looking and, under normal circumstances, quite likeable. I retreated to my room and started to work on a new poem about my visit to the crystal factory. I got a rough draft down on paper, and then put on my earphones and turned on the tiny transistor radio. A commercial station was rebroadcasting the signal from the Bloomberg all-news station in New York. It was disconcerting—not to mention beside the point in Scotland—to

hear about all the bridge and tunnel closings, the trains and planes that were not running, the newscasters' frantic descriptions of the chaos in lower Manhattan and their suggestions about routes New Yorkers might take to get back to their homes. But at least their comments were not offensive, and their hysteria made sense as a response to direct experience. For the rest of the evening and into the next day, in shock, I sat in my room playing Free Cell on my laptop, listening to the radio, and trying to figure out how to write about reason and unreason in light of the attacks. "Because this is the kind of event that argues Reason should prevail," I wrote in my journal. "Religious fanaticism results in Evil. And the response—Bush's equally fanatic attempt to line up the forces of Good for all-out war against Evil—will only produce more terror, more death, more Evil. So how can I support Unreason? The truth is, I feel completely inadequate to write about any of this..."



I couldn't write about it for years. It took me a long time to absorb the lessons of 9/11 and to understand how they related to my own life: to my old fear of the husband I loved, to the anxiety aroused by a cancer diagnosis, to my visceral hatred of politicians who use fear to gain and hold power. In the fall of 2001, all I knew was that I was scared.

The Hawthornden residency lasted until the end of September. By then, I was more than ready to get back home to Madison, Wisconsin, back to my family and friends. But I'd planned to spend a week in Glasgow and another in England. My return ticket had me leaving London on October 15. Of course, I could try to change the ticket. But although I'd never before been afraid of flying, I didn't really want to get on a plane and fly across the Atlantic Ocean.

I decided to stay another two weeks, as planned, in Great Britain. It made me nervous to leave remote, bucolic Hawthornden; still, traveling (by ground transportation) in Scotland and England felt

safer than heading home. But sitting in Edinburgh Waverley station, waiting for the Glasgow train, I discovered that safety—or the perception of safety—is relative. It had long been my habit to start any journey with a takeout latte, and when I arrived about an hour early at the train station, I was delighted to discover a takeout coffee stand. I sat on one of the wooden benches in the vast waiting room, sipping my latte, thinking about the many times I'd stopped at a coffee shop on the way out of Madison. I ran my thumb across the textured cardboard sleeve wrapped around the paper cup; it felt familiar and reassuring. When I finished the coffee, I looked around for a trash can. A woman sitting on the bench across from me noticed. "Oh, dearie, there aren't any bins," she said. "Just leave it on the floor."

I'm sure I looked puzzled. "We haven't had bins for years," she explained sympathetically. "The IRA hid bombs in them. Put it on the floor," she repeated. "They'll come along in a few minutes to sweep everything up."



I returned to the United States in mid-October. I wanted to be home, but I was still extremely anxious about the process of getting there. News reports the week before I left England described two occasions when planes in the United States were forced to make unscheduled landings accompanied by F-16s. In one, a "mentally ill" man tried to force entry to the airliner's cockpit. According to the second report—which interrupted a 10 PM TV newscast I was watching at my friend's house in Tunbridge Wells—a Delta flight from Atlanta to Los Angeles had been forced to land in Louisiana. I hoped my flights would not require Air Force escorts.

My ticket routed me from London to Minneapolis and then to Chicago, where I would catch a bus to Madison. I didn't mind landing in Minnesota, but I wanted to avoid O'Hare, which seemed like a good target for terrorists. Less than a week before I was scheduled to leave England, four anthrax cases had surfaced in the

United States. Two employees of a Florida publishing company and an assistant to Tom Brokaw at NBC news in New York City were ill. The fourth person, a photo editor for the *Sun*, a supermarket tabloid, had died after inhaling anthrax spores that arrived in his office mail. In my overactive imagination, terrorists released anthrax into the HVAC system at O'Hare just as I arrived. I tried repeatedly—on the phone and at the airport—to change my reservation so I could fly directly from Minneapolis to Madison. At first, Northwest Airlines told me this was simply impossible. Finally a ticket agent said it was possible, but it would cost \$150. I decided it was cheaper to pray.

On the plane to Minneapolis, I huddled in my window seat, grateful—for once—to be small, to require so little space. All the seats were full. Northwest, we learned, had canceled three flights from Detroit to Florida and moved passengers from a Gatwick-Detroit flight onto our Minnesota-bound plane. Detroit, I knew, had a large Muslim population. *Better safe than sorry*, I thought, and hated myself for being a racist. But the cancellations gave me a strange kind of hope: maybe by the time the plane got to Minneapolis, Northwest would also have canceled flights in and out of O'Hare. A couple of hours before we landed, I opened my journal and wrote, "I have *never* been so anxious about traveling, not even on the ancient Aeroflot planes we took inside the Soviet Union in 1989. And I have to say that I find myself mistrustful of all the non-whites on the plane (and I haven't even seen any Arabs—I'm talking mostly about blacks). This is a terrible admission but I think necessary to admit."

Responding to Terror

Of course I survived my trip, including my brief transit through O'Hare, unscathed by either anthrax or terrorists of any race, religion, or ethnic origin. But once I got home I discovered that I was

not the only one prey to anxiety and prejudice. The entire country seemed to be on high alert, terrified of what the future might bring. The United States was, without question, a different place than it had been when I left for Scotland in late August. It even looked different. National Guard troops, dressed in camouflage and carrying M-16 rifles, stood watch at airport security when I arrived in Minneapolis and Chicago. Ugly concrete barricades surrounded the entrances to the State Capitol in downtown Madison. Flags waved from car radio antennas and makeshift poles stuck into front lawns; flags festooned porch railings; flag decals decorated storm doors and plate glass restaurant windows. But it wasn't just that the country had changed physically. The mood was entirely different. When I flew to Scotland, I left a land of 281 million people who behaved according to their expectations that daily life would continue in an orderly and predictable manner. When I returned, this confidence seemed utterly destroyed, replaced by a kind of universal unease.

I had felt a similar sort of mass anxiety before. When I visited the Soviet Union in 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the entire country seemed on edge. On any given day, it seemed as though half the population expected the future to bring them nothing but prosperity and joy, while the other half gloomily discussed the endless misery and poverty ahead. The next day, it seemed, everyone switched positions: the optimists grew moody and doleful, the pessimists assumed the brave and hopeful stance. In truth, no one could predict the future. At the time, I had recently left my husband, and I knew, too well, the pendulum of anxiety that swung between despair and joy. It felt like the entire Soviet Union was in the throes of a divorce. An uncertain, unpredictable future made everybody anxious.

In October 2001 the United States seemed gripped by the same mood, but without any hint of optimism. And the anxiety manifested itself in troubling ways: in overt attacks on innocent Muslims and Arab Americans; in the kind of uneasy, involuntary racial profiling I had discovered in myself on my flight home from

London; in an acceptance of limitations on civil rights and civil liberties that seemed born of both fear and reflexive patriotism.

As a nation, we had lost our sense of security, of a safe and predictable future. Never mind that security was always an illusion. Any of us could fall victim to a car accident or a fatal illness at any time; despite the end of the cold war, the threat of nuclear annihilation had never disappeared. But before 9/11 we *felt* safe, buffered by oceans to the east and west, by friendly neighbors to the north and south. Since 9/11 we have, as individuals and as a society, been plagued by fear and anxiety. Going through airport security, we wonder when—not whether—the next attack will happen; prompted by news reports of terrorist actions abroad, we worry that we, or someone we love, will fall victim to a subway bomb, a suicide mission at a local cafe, or some other outrage that we have yet to imagine.

The Realm of Fear and Anxiety

Because I am interested in the interplay of reason and emotion in human behavior, I see our reactions to fearful events as—among other things—expressions of our need to reconcile thoughts and feelings. Some people tend to be more emotionally adept than analytical; I happen to be more comfortable with my head than my heart. But the need to balance reason and unreason exists for all of us. No one falls in love because of her superior analytic skills. But as anyone contemplating marriage knows, just because you experience a strong emotion doesn't mean it's a good idea to stop thinking.

When I started this book, I was convinced that a little reason might go a long way toward helping us cope successfully with anxiety and fear. I wanted to get a grip on my emotions, and I fell back on the childhood lesson my father taught: “use your head.” I tried to think myself into a state of calm. But the more I thought about the problem, and the more research I did, the more I realized that, while we would all benefit from the application of

clear thinking in dangerous situations, rationality has its limits.

This book traces my journey into the realm of fear and anxiety. It's a vast and varied territory, and I approached it from several directions. Fear and anxiety, like other emotions, color virtually all aspects of our lives. As I explored the sources of my own fears and sought ways to tame my anxiety, I found myself entering the fields of politics, science, psychology, and philosophy. The next few pages provide a kind of route-map to help you follow my path, and the path of the book. If you're the kind of explorer-reader who disdains maps and guidebooks, skip to the last four paragraphs of this introduction, and then continue on your way.

Chapter 1: The Goldmark Murders. I began work on this book just after the 2004 presidential election. I was appalled by the way George Bush had used fear—dwelling on the terrorist threat—to gin up votes. It reminded me of the lingering effects of another era when politicians used fear to manipulate public opinion. During my childhood, attacks on Communists and liberals smeared as “fellow travelers” played on Americans’ fear of Soviet attacks and nuclear war. In the 1950s, McCarthyite tactics cost thousands of people their livelihoods. But the effects of McCarthyism continued long after Joe McCarthy’s death. In 1962, John Goldmark, a respected Washington state legislator, lost his seat as a result of a libelous smear campaign. Twenty-three years later, in 1985, a self-styled “soldier” in the war against communism murdered John Goldmark’s son (my college friend Chuck), Chuck’s wife, and their young children. My research revealed that the murderer killed out of an odd convergence of rational (although ill-informed) thinking and gut reaction. But I also discovered that the political manipulation of fear continues to echo—in the Goldmarks’ case, even into the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2: Uncertain Futures, Mortal Fears. Thinking about Chuck Goldmark’s death, and particularly about his murderer’s vulnerability to political fear-mongering, led me to consider my own fears and anxieties and my own coping strategies. I thought—and

wrote—about my two cancer diagnoses and my experience of living with, and eventually leaving, a physically and emotionally abusive husband. Rational thinking, I realized, helped me cope with the intense anxiety provoked by two potentially fatal diseases, but my failure to acknowledge gut feelings kept me stuck in an abusive marriage for seventeen years.

Chapter 3: Pine Cones and Almonds. I realized that fear and anxiety are important parts of our survival mechanism, as individuals and even as a species, and I wanted to know more about how scientists understand the chemical and neurological processes behind these emotions. As I learned about the biological processes that determine our behavioral responses to fearful stimuli, I discovered that neuroscientists distinguish fear from anxiety. This seemed to me to be an extremely useful distinction. Perhaps rational thinking can help us cope with anxiety about the future, even if it might be less useful when we face, and fear, an immediate danger.

Chapter 4: Coping with Fear and Anxiety. We all have similar biological and chemical responses to fearful situations, but psychologists know that some people actually seek out experiences that provide thrills and chills, while others don't even want to watch scary movies. I decided to ask other people about their strategies for coping with fear and anxiety. I wondered whether successful copers were more likely to be rational, or emotional. I interviewed a world-class mountaineer and a hydroplane racer—both familiar with the Goldmarks' murders—who described their responses to physical fear, and an American Buddhist doctor who explained his reaction to a life-threatening carjacking in Caracas, Venezuela. From these experiences and from my own, I concluded that training and experience can help individuals respond appropriately—and rationally—to fear and anxiety.

Chapters 5 and 6: Weaving the Fabric of Fear. Critics often accuse politicians and the media of creating a culture of fear. It's true that

these “outside” forces feed our fears, but the rest of us are also complicit because we are unable to accurately assess the risks of modern life. I wasn’t surprised to discover that informed and rational thinking can substantially reduce our level of anxiety, but I found it sobering to realize that even the most educated statisticians have difficulty deciding whether a situation is truly threatening, and acting appropriately. And I was, in an odd way, reassured to know that my reactions to 9/11 — both my strong desire to be with family and friends and my reflexive racial profiling — were normal.

Chapter 7: The Courage to Live with Fear. Coping successfully with fear and anxiety requires that we pay attention to both the rational and the emotional aspects of our natures. But the very fact that we live in a *culture* of fear suggests that successful coping is not a task we can easily accomplish on our own. As many of us learned in 2001, our communities offer comfort and solace. Finding the strength to resist the forces that feed anxiety may also best be achieved in community. I end my journey through the realm of anxiety and fear by studying two communal responses to extreme danger: the 1943 escape of 600 Jewish inmates from Sobibor, a Polish concentration camp; and the tenacity of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, in Colombia, which maintains its commitment to nonviolence and justice despite the murders of more than 150 of its 900 members. As these stories attest, we can create a culture of courage when we confront our anxieties together; when we realize, as Shakespeare suggested, that “horrible imaginings” present at least as great a threat to our well-being as present dangers; when we recognize, as Franklin Roosevelt did, that we have nothing to fear but fear itself.



Many of my friends and acquaintances got very excited when they heard that I was writing a book about fear. Their excitement made me uncomfortable: they seemed to think that the book would

somehow banish all their fears, cure their anxieties, let them sleep the sleep of babies ignorant of the world. I wish I had such power. Perhaps, if I were a fairy godmother instead of a writer, I could wave my magic wand and disappear the terrorists, the economic uncertainties, the natural disasters, and even the nasty relatives that can make anyone anxious about what tomorrow may bring. But part of coping successfully with anxiety and fear is recognizing, and accepting, what is beyond our control. I'm not a fairy godmother. And even if I did have a magic wand, I wouldn't abolish fear; as you'll see, it's an essential survival tool.

All I can do, as a writer, is offer my perspective, my experience, and some tips I've learned from reading a few books and talking with other people who—like all of us—have to live in a sometimes dangerous, often unpredictable world. We can learn from each other, and together, we can do better than merely cope with fear and anxiety: we can confront with a blend of reason and emotion the forces that would—if we allowed them—deny us courage and hope. Despite the threats that surround us, we can live well, even joyously.

Powerful forces oppose this truth; it's in their interest to keep the audience anxious, the voters afraid. Corporations vie for commercial time on the horror-filled nightly news. Publishers and producers know that scary books and movies sell. Politicians—Democrats as well as Republicans—evoke the terrorist threat, the red phone ringing at 3 AM, the menace of dark-skinned people, to generate votes for themselves.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of confronting those who would keep us afraid. That is why I begin with the story of the Goldmark murders, a case study of the terrible long-term consequences of the deliberate manipulation of fear.