

## Courage in the Face of Fascism, a Psycho-social Perspective

Victor Ashear

Oct. 2, 2022

When Janet asked me to speak today on the theme of “courage,” an idea for a presentation came to my mind immediately. Speaking of the practice of psychotherapy a supervisor once said, “The more you understand, the less you blame.” I have been looking for a way to deal with my anger at the fascist turn of events in this country. I was reminded of a topic I studied in depth in graduate school, and I wanted to return to it because of its relevance to the current political situation. Preparing this talk has been helpful to me to move beyond blame, and I hope some of you will find it helpful too.

We should have learned the lessons of WWII. The world witnessed the enormous damage and inhumanity perpetrated by Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. We thought after that war the world was moving away from totalitarianism and towards greater freedom and democracy. We were appalled by the massacre at Tiananmen Square. We were inspired by the Arab Spring movement until we saw it collapse. We saw Maduro hang on in Venezuela when we hoped for a change to a democratically elected leader. How do we explain the attraction of fascism in general, and why is it gaining popularity in Europe, Asia and in the Americas?

Our 5<sup>th</sup> Principle states that we affirm and promote the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in the world at large. Some of you may have watched the PBS/Ken Burns documentary on the role of the USA during the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust. One of the questions raised by the series is, why was there such tolerance in our country of antisemitism, and an unwillingness to act to help the Jews? Why did the German people allow the Nazi’s to engage in their bigotry and slaughter, and their conquest of neighboring countries? I am going to suggest that at least in part there was a lack of courage. I want to explore with you where this lack of courage might stem from.

When we see our democracy being threatened, our Principles and values compel us to act. That action does require courage. I find it inspiring to know that the American Unitarian Service Committee staff were risking their lives in Europe, along with many Europeans in rescuing Jews from the Reich. Why do some people stand up and others either succumb or stand idly by? What prevents acting with courage?

Social psychologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, who happened to be Jewish, lived in Germany during the rise of the Nazi regime. To explain what he saw, including the fact that a large percentage of the public was either in agreement with the assault on Jews or at least were complicit, or who felt powerless, he wrote Escape from Freedom. According to Fromm part of the answer lies in the collapse of societal structures at the end of the Middle Ages which resulted in a great deal of anxiety. During the Middle Ages, society was very structured, and everyone knew their place in it. No one questioned what to do with their life. Among the serfs, if you were a boy and your father was a blacksmith you would become a blacksmith. If you were a girl, you would learn to cook and sew and tend the garden etc. from your mother. The age of the Enlightenment brought with it the hope that reason and humanity would prevail, and people could govern themselves. Democracies began to take hold in America and Europe. However, some people longed to a time when greater guidance and structure would return. In the aftermath of defeat in WWI and the collapse of the Weimar Republic the Third Reich promised security and restored prominence on the world stage.

There is a tendency to blame Fascist leaders entirely for the development of totalitarian societies. The thinking is if one could just eliminate the leaders the problem of fascism would disappear. Fromm suggested otherwise. He proposed that there is a symbiosis between the “strong” leaders and the followers. They need each other to produce a movement. For example, when the Soviet Union collapsed the democracy that followed lasted very briefly and Putin seized the opportunity to return to totalitarian domination. The Russian people did not want freedom. They found it to be anxiety provoking. Post WWI Germany was dealing with defeat and the collapse of their economy. The German people were ripe for a totalitarian leader. Especially during difficult times, societies are vulnerable to takeover by a totalitarian leader.

Over time it has become more and more apparent that Trump is a threat to our democracy. Perhaps the most convincing evidence is the many ways he and his allies sought to overturn the results of the 2020 election, as the House January 6<sup>th</sup> Committee has clearly demonstrated. What were the circumstances that led to the popularity of Trump as a presidential candidate in 2015? Among the factors that have been suggested included that our country is shifting from majority white to majority people of color. The first African American had been elected president in 2007. Gay marriage had become legal. LGBTQ concerns became more prominent. Women were taking on more important and powerful roles in society. There was a perception on the part of some that gun rights would be taken away. There was a sense that Christian values as many understood them, were under threat. There was a fear perhaps more imagined than real that too many people were crossing our borders illegally and posing a threat. Some of these listed changes were real and some were exaggerated. For many whites and especially men, this cultural shift, as they perceived it was threatening to their way of life. In our country as it was true in Nazi Germany the appeal is to the lower middle class. This group of voters tends to feel left out. It tends to see others as taking opportunities away from them. They see the country changing in ways they do not like. They fear the loss of white majority. In Germany the despised group to be blamed for society’s problems were the Jews. Here it is Jews, people of color, non-Christians, Democrats, and immigrants.

In an authoritarian movement, those who dominate as well as those who submit, depend on each other in a kind of symbiosis. Neither the dominant ones nor those who submit are capable of independent functioning. Fromm uses the example of the controlling spouse to illustrate this point. The controlling spouse becomes totally lost if their partner were to escape. It was observed by Goebbels, one of the Nazi leaders, that mass meetings allow participants to feel that they are not alone but rather a part of something large. Leaders can feel a sense of power in speaking to a large mass. So mass rallies can be seen as a kind of symbiosis too.

In his book Escape from Freedom Fromm provides a developmental psychological perspective that adds to the social and societal perspective that I mentioned, having to do with the breakdown of traditional structures, norms, and roles, which engenders anxiety. Too many of us are terrified by the prospect of being free. They anticipate that freedom would lead to social isolation and abandonment. Fromm asks if freedom is merely the absence of something or is it the presence of something as well? Those who are comfortable with their freedom want others to experience freedom too. The developmental psychological frame begins with the study of the newborn. A newborn baby is utterly dependent on its parents for its survival. This newborn has not yet formed a concept of itself as a separate being. We are all familiar with the phenomenon of “separation anxiety.” A typical one year old will begin to cry unconsolably when its parent leaves the room, even if there are people in the room who could care for it. In normal psychological development the infant, then toddler, then child moves through stages that result in a sense of self that is separate from its parents (and yet incorporates values, attitudes and

behaviors that are modeled after its parents to some degree). This process is expected to be complete around the age of 5 in normal circumstances. The process is known by developmental psychologists as “separation/individuation.” I don’t know if there are statistics on the percentage of American adults who did not fully achieve this state. Writing in 1940 Fromm surmised that most people had not achieved maturity. He saw a tendency to worship power and the state, above healthy relationships and tending to human needs. What I do know is that without having completed the process of separation/individuation successfully, without the capacity to feel autonomous and whole, one is vulnerable to the persuasion and control of a strong leader. Fromm believed that a basic existential task that all people need to address is the awareness the each of us is alone and that we will one day die. If we can’t calmly and courageously accept our aloneness, we are bound to experience anxiety and to seek security in ways that are not life enhancing and self-affirming. Those who have not completed separation/individuation successfully are prone to develop unhealthy relationships. They are prone to abuse and manipulation by others, to be too trusting or alternatively to seek to exploit, or to be paranoid. It is only out of the mature awareness of our separateness that healthy, mutual, and egalitarian relationships are formed.

In this context I am reminded of the 3 wonderful presentations delivered at last week’s service. Ian, Dan, and Rosemary each spoke of the fact that they were freely able to make a choice to separate from the religion of their childhood without fear of damnation. They found belonging here among like-minded people who also think for themselves. Belonging is undeniably a basic human need. If we seek to meet this need through egalitarian relationships that are respectful of boundaries there is less likelihood of being attracted to authoritarian and fascist appeals.

Sometime after the publication of Escape from Freedom a group of social scientists decided to study empirically the appeal to authoritarianism and fascism. They published a book entitled, The Authoritarian Personality in 1950.

In the 1980’s Bob Altemeyer, a Canadian-American social psychologist summarized the essential findings of the book and the considerable research that followed in the ensuing decades. He defined the right-wing authoritarian (RWA) personality as someone who exhibits a high degree of submission, a general aggressiveness, and a rigid adherence to conventional norms. He expanded on these as follows:

1. A high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in the society in which one lives. Right-wing authoritarians tend to accept what their leaders say is true and readily comply with their commands. They believe that respecting authority is an important moral virtue that everyone in the community must hold. They tend to place strict limits on how far the authorities can be criticized and believe that the critics are troublemakers who don't know what they are talking about. RWAs are extremely submissive even to authority figures who are dishonest, corrupt, and inept. They will insist that their leaders are honest, caring, and competent, dismissing any evidence to the contrary as either false or inconsequential. They believe that the authorities have the right to make their own decisions, even if that includes breaking the rules that they impose on everyone else.
2. A general aggressiveness, directed against various persons, that is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities. RWA’s can behave very aggressively towards people whom their leaders have marked as enemies, or whom the RWA’s perceive to be threats to the proper social order. Anyone can become the target of authoritarian aggression, but it is more frequently outsiders or socially unconventional people who are targeted. Examples include communists and Jews in

Nazi Germany, and feminists and homosexuals in the United States. But an authoritarian is more likely than a non-authoritarian to attack even conventional people if his authority figures sanction such an attack. Altemeyer has further observed that RWA's prefer to attack when the odds are in their favor, going so far as to call RWA's "cowardly" because they typically attack victims who cannot defend themselves, such as women. The factor that best instigates authoritarian aggression is fear, particularly fear of people. This can include violent people such as bullies, terrorists, and foreign invaders, but it can also include people they perceive as morally degenerate, such as homosexuals and atheists.

3. A high degree of adherence to the social conventions that are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities. RWA's have a strong commitment to the traditional norms of society. They don't want to be unusual; they want to be just like everyone else in their group, and likewise they want everyone else to be conventional too. Diversity irritates them. Conforming to these norms is not just a social imperative but a moral one. RWA's reject the notion that social norms are arbitrary and that foreign norms are just as valid as theirs. With regards to religion, RWA's tend to be fundamentalists. It is not surprising that many in the evangelical Christian movement are attracted to fascism. In some Christian circles, as was discussed last week, thinking for oneself is discouraged. Fear of hell is used as a means of control, and it fosters dependency. Some in the evangelical community tend to feel morally superior to those not sharing their beliefs.

Antisemitism and racism are tools of fascists. Mature, healthy self-esteem does not depend on feeling superior to others and putting others with different beliefs down. Healthy self-esteem is the foundation of courage and the desire and capacity to protect others from oppression as well as to protect democracy itself. Here is how Fromm expressed it. (Please excuse the sexist language.):

...man the more he gains freedom in the sense of emerging from the original "oneness of man and nature," and the more he becomes an "individual," has no choice but to unite himself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work; or else to seek security by such ties with the world as destroy his freedom and the integrity of his individual self.

We choose to be UUs because we are independent thinkers and truth seekers. Now is the time to defend our values and principles and to help defend our form of government. Now is the time for courage.

Here are some opportunities to use to express courage and to oppose fascism and support democracy: 1. You can send a check to support "UU the Vote" an initiative to help overcome barriers to voting in the approaching November election. 2. You can support local and national candidates who seek to foster the integrity of voting and protect voting rights. 3. You can speak out respectfully when in the presence of others who express disinformation or misinformation. 4. As UU's have done throughout our nation's history we need to support a quality balanced education for our children to include the development of critical thinking and thinking for oneself. 5. We need to support mental health services. 6. We need to support the factual reporting of the news in all media. Erich Fromm made it clear why these things are important. They are consistent with our UU values and Principles.