
KAREN:

The Old Woman Meets a Fish

The greatest thing is to give no fear.

How? Have no fear.

How? "With no hindrance of mind.

*No hindrance, therefore no fear."*⁴²

KOAN

One night, Karen had this dream:

A young woman stepped out onto the path. She met a wolf. The wolf glowered, grinned, and growled. The woman ran.

This same woman, now a mother, again walked on the path. A bear appeared, bawling and beating his chest. The woman stood her ground and greeted the bear, and the bear ran.

The same woman, now gray-haired, drew near the wide, blue sea and saw a beautiful fish. But when she reached into the water to touch it, it became a roaring, flaming dragon that towered over her, flashing fierce, sharp teeth and steely spines. "Ah, teacher!" she said softly. At these words, the dragon wept salt tears.

REFLECTION

Karen adds: *As a young girl I wandered for hours by the ocean, lost in imagining the wild, mysterious, unknown creatures living in the sea. Now, I swim with them.*

Isn't one of the wonderful—and sometimes not so wonderful—things about growing older our seeing that we have become the very things we once feared or hated? We snap at our children, and a moment later realize that we're behaving like the mother or father we swore we'd never be. Ancient fears and nightmares plague us. Some of us are afraid of the dark even as we get older, or else we relive abuse that may have happened when we were children. Others seem to carry fears from previous generations: a buddy's death in the battlefield, a family catastrophe, pogroms and Nazi uniforms marching in goosestep. Add to that our now also being afraid of getting sick and growing old, being left alone, being the last one living.

A lifetime of fear.

It's only natural to want to run away. But if everything is one, then we're light, shadow, and everything in between. So what shadows do we escape from? What light do we run to? Every day presents me with answers to these questions. I look out my window and see leaves fall during autumn—do I get anxious at these seasonal signs of decline and death? I work less than I did before and am assailed by misgivings: Will I be good enough, valuable enough? Will anybody care? These are the monsters that have lived in our attic for many years. Can I be curious instead of fearful? Can I listen deeply to what life is showing me?

As we age we lose many of our defenses because we don't have the strength and energy to keep them up. What happens

AGE, & DEATH

then? If we haven't worked with the wild and terrible things in our lives we can become more frozen and congealed than ever, mean and bitter. Working with them, don't I realize that their essence, like my own, is pure energy? When I constrict and turn away, I am also turning away from important sources of energy for my life.

For the Native Americans, animals are spirits that help people. They include scorpions, snakes, wolves, and bears. Practicing devotedly, living long enough with openness and courage, don't we experience ourselves as a circle of life, including wolf, bear, fish, and dragon? There are fewer icons and pedestals, and also fewer enemies. In T. S. Eliot's words:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*⁴³

What would it be like, to know the place where we started for the first time?

A little like the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, we leave home, love, struggle, battle with monsters, face temptations and impossible situations, lose loved ones, lose our way, and—if we're lucky—finally come home. Can't we experience old age as finally coming home? Even though our skin is more wrinkled, don't we feel more comfortable in it? Even as our bones ache, haven't we learned the limits of things? Don't we feel our parents deep inside us because we are their age now? And don't we face mistakes—ours and others'—with more equanimity now, realizing that they may not have been mistakes at all?

THE BOOK OF HOUSEHOLDER KOANS

We've faced the wolf, the bear, the fish, and the dragon; we know they're us. We're finally comfortable with all our different forms and shapes, be they the child, the adult, or the old man or woman.

Can I know this place today? Can I know it every day? Do I have to wait until I've accumulated the wisdom of old age? There is a way to know and claim it this minute. By now you know how. You can encounter the bear, wolf, and dragon with a beginner's mind at any age. Do curiosity, openness, and optimism just belong to children, or are they available to us any time, even now?

What dangerous animals have you met on your journey? Are you afraid of them now, too? What has changed? Are there new fears that have arisen instead?