

## Senior Forum - Thursday, March 16

10 -11 a.m. • No cost

### We Will Not Be Held Hostage by Fear: Resolving Fear through Knowledge and Action

Bruce McBeath and Karl Rydholm

Just freaking out helps nobody! These uncertain times can pull us off center and disconnect us from important personal and social values. We need ways to access the “wisdom” in aging to navigate today’s world and identify our own “right action.”

Please come to March 16’s forum and add your experience and perspective into our reflections. All are welcome. (Dr. Bruce McBeath is a clinical psychologist and the Rev. Karl Rydholm is a Lutheran clergyman).

#### Look, Then Look Again!

On any given day, the news offers one more reminder to be afraid! This era of “fake news” and “alternative facts” has already had record numbers of Americans checking out copies of the George Orwell classic-- **1984** -- to re-orient to the dynamics of political spin sponsored by fear. This stuff was a lot more fun to read in college than to live through it today, yet understanding how fear works is essential for managing it now.

Essential because unchecked fear is a powerful drug that makes us sick! But what helps us maintain a “safer” relationship with this most primitive of instincts?

Right off, it helps to know a couple of “real facts” about how fear operates in the psyche of us humans. Back in the upper reaches of our brain stem lies the amygdala, an organ evolved to increase our survival odds. This is the center of our “fight, flight, or freeze” response arising in the face of threat. This could be immediate, or evoked out of personal past thought to be real (which might in some cases turn out to be real!). Our amygdala sounds the alarm and we become hyper-alert and ready to respond.

That’s Fact One. Fact Two lies in the power of intermittent reinforcement. Conditions that arouse fear needn’t be present every time, or



even hardly ever. A tiny number of real events (or “thought-to-be-real”) can create the conditions for our ever-ready amygdala to fire up preparation for threat, now real or imagined. Infrequent, even rare, and particularly unpredictable events are best able to reinforce fear.

This shows how fear feeds on the exaggeration, deception, and distortion within “fake news.” Our reactions to these

conditions of “alternative reality” will activate our amygdala and fuel more intense experiences of fearfulness unless we are very careful to separate out what’s real from what’s not. For this we use another portion of our brain where our capacity for reason and cool judgment reside.

Thus, healthy living requires regular doses of “real reality.” We require access to the kind of information that helps us determine when to be concerned or when it’s just another “false alarm.” **“Fake facts” -- as George Orwell well knew -- are designed to hijack our amygdala and shut down the parts of our brain that help us process information and form solid conclusions.** “Alt. facts” intend to make us prisoners of our fears. “Real truth” is always our antidote to fear-mongering. © 2017

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