

Joan and I recently purchased the farmhouse and land where she grew up. Her grandfather built the front two rooms in 1913, her father added the two back rooms and upstairs in 1946, and her uncle added two porches in 1951. He was drinking at the time, so the porches are crooked and will need to be pulled off and rebuilt, which we're starting tomorrow.

I enjoy having a project. I'm happiest when I have a mission in life and restoring this house has become my off-duty objective. I think about it a great deal and plan and dream and write ideas on scraps of paper and visit hardware stores and building supply centers. I've been learning the language of construction—*kneewalls*, *sills*, *bearing points*—and the single most important construction term: *money*. More money than I ever imagined it would take to renovate such a small home.

So we've been working on the house, anticipating that happy day when our work is complete and we can go there as we did when Joan's mother was alive and go for walks and watch the birds and listen to the quiet and sit at night in the yard, after supper, and watch the lightning bugs and see the stars.

Last week, I was speaking with a man named Charlie who lives over the hill and through the woods from the farmhouse and he mentioned his garage had been broken into and things stolen. When I heard that, I became anxious and began to worry whether our farmhouse would be safe and what I might do make sure it didn't get broken into or vandalized. Bigger, thicker doors and locking windows and burglar alarms. The more I thought about this, the more anxious I became, until I found myself forming a hatred against the people who might one day do this. Of course, I don't know their names or what they look like or how many of them there are. In fact, I don't even know if they exist, they're still very much in my imagination, but they have taken up residence in my mind and they seem very real to me and I don't like them.

I tried being logical. I reminded myself that the house had been standing since 1913, had been empty for three years, in all of those years had been mostly unlocked, and in all that time had never been robbed. It is probably the safest 1,200 square feet in Indiana, but that didn't calm my fears. I still created an enemy, an Other, in my mind, believed he posed a threat to me, my family, and home, and built up hateful, fearful feelings about a person I'm not even sure exists. I don't know his name, don't know what he looks like, have never met him, and though I call him a he, I'm not even certain of his gender. But I have identified him as someone I must protect myself from, as the Other.

And I am so skilled at this, it took me less than five seconds after talking with Charlie to feel this way. I didn't have to work on it at all. Just as soon as I learned Charlie had been robbed, I created this potential enemy in my mind, saw him as a threat to me, and decided to go to great lengths to keep him out of my life. He is the Other. There has always been the Other. Someone we fear, someone from whom we must protect ourselves. Were we to let down our guard the Other would overtake us.

One of the oldest stories in the Bible is the story of the Tower of Babel. It is the story of the Other, when God so feared the potential harm the Other might cause, that God confused their language and scattered them to the winds, as one would blow a dandelion and disperse the seeds.

One of the first things a religion does is create an Other. In Judaism, it was the serpent in the garden and eventually the Gentiles. In the Christian story, the Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes and eventually the pagans. In Islam, it was idols and eventually the infidels. But there is always an Other. One we must fear, one who represents a threat to us, one we must confuse and scatter to the winds. More often than not, this Other is a product of our imaginations, the sum total of our worst fears.

Over the course of history, the Other has gone by many names—enemy, communist, capitalist, socialist, Democrat, Republican, atheist, fundamentalist, witch, homosexual, black, Muslim, illegal immigrant, Jew, alien, right-wing, left-wing, criminal, ex-wife, ex-husband, political insider, banker, welfare cheat, the list goes on. The Other has as many names as we have fears and prejudices.

As soon as we identify another as the Other, we no longer have to love them, no longer have to befriend them, no longer have to listen to them, no longer have to care for them, no longer have any responsibility for them at all, except to despise them and fear them and scatter them to the winds.

This feeling is so pervasive, so universal, the Bible seems to indicate, in the Tower of Babel story, that even God has fallen prey to this fear of the Other. Of course, I suspect the real truth is whoever first told this story, thousands of years ago, had his own prejudices, which he happily and conveniently attributed to God. For there is no greater comfort in the world than to believe God shares our hatreds, biases, and fears, to believe God despises the Other as much as we do. Because religion has so willingly and eagerly taught us to fear the Other, it is incumbent upon religion and those who practice it to undo the damage it helped create.

Who is the Other in your life? Who do you fear? Who were you taught to despise?

I remember when Lee and Mary Lee Comer moved in next door to us back in the mid-1970's. Mary Lee had grown up Southern Baptist in Tennessee, while my mother had grown up Roman Catholic in Indiana. They were visiting one day and Mary Lee said to my mother, "When I was growing up, I was taught you were going to hell." And my mother said, "I was taught the exact same thing about you."

In every religion, in the souls of each of us, there are at least two voices. One voice tells us to be afraid, to exclude, to divide. The other voice tells us to be courageous, to include, to unite. Which voice falls on fertile soil? Which voice do you nurture and feed and grow?

I was in North Carolina this past week speaking to the supporters and employees of a counseling ministry at Wake Forest. Wonderful people. They laughed at all my jokes. This man named Frank picked me up at the hotel. We're driving to the event and I glance over in the other lane and see this bumper sticker that read "I Support the Separation of Church and Hate." The great temptation for any religion is to make God as small and fearful as themselves. But God only makes beloved children. It is we humans who make the Other.