



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is best-selling author, Rabbi Harold Kushner. He has a new book called “Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World.”

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back writer Tom McGrath, who will reflect on our attitude toward facing troubles.

Lydia Talbot: We begin with the story of Chicago artist, Naomi Pridjian. Her struggle with serious illness was one of the most terrifying but deeply spiritual experiences of her life. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Naomi Pridjian: I did not grow up feeling close to anything faithful at all. My mother saw that I could draw and encouraged that. After art school I found myself in a situation with a small child, a single mother, and I felt, “Is this all there is? This can’t be all there is.” And so, my daughter was going to the Reba Place day nursery at the time, run by Reba Place fellowship, a Mennonite community, and I asked if they had services. It was after that that I came into a sense of spirituality and that is really when I became a Christian. I always knew that there was something that happened internally and it would always run up and down, vertical. That’s the space where I know when things are right. It’s a sense of knowing. Slowly I began to realize that what I was doing everyday was meditative. I was having my own experience of God.

And then I decided, well, why don’t I learn how to do digital art. I just loved it. I loved the colors. I love the process. I loved everything about it. I made a forty image project of my mother’s story. It was a complete story of her life based on her own journals.

[This is my mother’s family. This was done just before my mother came to the United States.]

That’s when I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. It was one of the most terrifying and deeply spiritual experiences that I’ve ever had, especially at night when I was just completely alone like free falling, free falling in total blackness. That’s where I met God. I had never met God before but I met God. I really did. I can’t describe it. I just did and I knew God was there. And then I had this Bible verse, Isaiah 43, verses 1 and 2: “It shall not overwhelm

you.” I just hung on to that. That’s when I really, really, really knew who I was, that I was a Christian after all, even though I had these doubts before.

I tried to implement a prayer that I had had while I was sick, which was: Please make my life meaningful. Please give me a pathway so that I can use this art in a meaningful way.

Spiritual transformation comes from suffering, if we can only hold out and see it through.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Our thanks to Naomi Pridjian for sharing her story. You can find out more about her art by visiting our web site at 30goodminutes.org. Now, let me tell you about today’s speaker.

Harold Kushner is Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel in the Boston Suburb of Natick, Massachusetts. In 1981, his book, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” became an international bestseller. It was translated into 14 languages and was named by the Book of the Month Club as one of the 10 most influential books of recent years. He followed that success with several more books, including “Who Needs God” and “When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough,” firmly establishing himself as one of our most important writers on religion. Rabbi Kushner’s new book is called, “Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World.” We’re honored and delighted to welcome Rabbi Harold Kushner back to “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Harold.

MESSAGE

Harold Kushner: Daniel, thank you very much.

A man came up to me after one of my lectures and said to me, "You seem to know your Bible. Can you tell me, what one sentence does God repeat more often than any other in the Bible?"

I thought for a moment and I said, "I believe it's the one about being kind to the widow, the orphan and the stranger."

He shook his head, "Not even close. The answer is, 'Don't be afraid.'"

I went home and looked it up and it turned out he was right. More than eighty times, God tells someone "Don't be afraid," usually translated as "Fear not."

He says it to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. He says it four times to Joshua in his first speech to him after the death of Moses. He says it to each of the prophets, and tells them to say it to the people in his name. In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly admonishes his disciples not to be afraid, and you may remember, those are the angel's first words to Mary.

Why all this emphasis on not being afraid? Because there are a lot of things out there to frighten us, and the more frightened we are, the worse job we will do to cope with our fears. Fear distorts our ability to think clearly, to evaluate risks. How often do election campaigns try not so much to persuade us of the advantages of one candidate but to frighten us of the consequences of electing

his opponent? That fear keeps us from analyzing the election rationally. Whenever there is a plane crash with loss of life, thousands of people who were planning to fly decide to drive instead, even though the chances of being hurt or killed in a car crash are much higher than in a plane crash.

Fear shrinks our souls, making us more selfish, less charitable, less idealistic. Being afraid diminishes our humanity. I can believe that God is disappointed with Adam in the opening pages of Genesis, not so much because he ate the forbidden fruit as because his first words to God were "I was afraid."

How do we cope with the things that scare us? How do we remain vigilant, alert to danger, without letting the fear take over our souls and render us less than we might be?

To take one example that is on the minds of a lot of people: We are concerned, and properly so, about another terrorist attack on the United States like the one on 9/11. Most of what can be done to prevent an attack will have to be done by governments, but there are some things we can do and just one thing we can do that would be wrong. We need to understand that the real targets of terrorists are not the people they kill but the people they frighten. Terrorist math is simple: kill one person and you frighten a hundred. Kill a thousand people and you frighten an entire population. Do you remember the DC sniper of a few years ago? One man with a rifle and a teenage accomplice was able to shut down virtually the entire Washington/Maryland area, because of the random nature of his killings. You never knew where he would strike next, so people were afraid to go anywhere.

But in that very randomness lies the weakness of the terrorist. If he succeeds in killing a few people but doesn't succeed in frightening everyone else, he will have failed. Suppose, for example, there was a plausible report that terrorists were going to strike a shopping mall somewhere in America next Tuesday. What do you think will happen? Probably most people would stay home and not go shopping. And that's what the terrorist wants. He wants to know he can frighten us away from doing what we want to do. But suppose, instead of staying home, we said to ourselves, "There are fifty thousand shopping malls in the United States. Even if the threat is real, the odds are 50,000 to one that it won't be the one I'm at. I'm in more danger driving to the mall than I am from a terrorist bomb." The only thing we can do to defeat terrorism is to withhold from them the one thing they are after, the power to scare us out of our normal lives. I remember the Israeli man whose daughter was badly injured in a bus bombing saying to a reporter, "There are worse things in life than being killed and one of them is to live every day of your life in fear."

But what about more personal fears, our dread of growing old and no longer being able to do things that give our lives meaning, and looming over all of them, the fear of death?

Many psychologists believe that the fear of death is the mother of all fears. All living things are fated to die, but only human beings know that, and that knowledge casts a shadow over all of our days, putting us in the valley of the shadow of death. We try so hard to achieve something, to leave something behind, to raise children who will perpetuate our name and our values, to do something memorable at work that our name will be attached to, as a way of defeating mortality.

We exercise, we monitor our cholesterol. But in the end, one fate awaits us all. Good people die, vegetarians die, people who pray every day die. If we can't cheat death, is there something we can do about the fear of death?

In my years as a congregational rabbi, I have sat at the bedsides of many people who knew that they were on the brink of dying. I sat at the bedside of my 14 year old son during the last days of his life. And they all taught me the same important lesson: very old and very sick people are not really afraid of death. When you are very sick, death may be the only cure for what ails you. What really frightens people who are running out of time is not the fear of death but the fear of not having lived, of having wasted one's life without ever doing anything memorable that would grant them posthumous immortality.

So the cure for the fear of death is to be able to focus on something you did that you can feel proud of leaving behind. If you didn't make a lot of money at work, were you a dedicated worker? Were you good friend and neighbor? Focus on the kind of husband or wife you were, the kind of parent you were. And start doing that now, so that when time is running out, you will never have reason to fear that you wasted it. Death is the end of life only the way a period is the end of a sentence. It doesn't empty the sentence of meaning. It defines what the sentence was saying.

How then shall we cope with the fear of death, the fear of misfortune, the fear of people out to hurt us? Do it as people of faith have always done it, by turning to God to give us what we need, not a God who guarantees happy endings, not a God who promises that nothing bad will ever happen to us because we're good people, but a God who promises that, no matter what happens, we will be able to handle it. And we will be able to handle it because there are resources within us and friends around us, and they will see us through.

Yes, it is a very scary world out there, but our faith in ourselves and our faith in God enables us to say, "I will not be afraid."

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Rabbi Harold Kushner, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Rabbi Harold Kushner.

Rabbi Kushner, it's a joy to have back on the program. Thank you for your compelling message on conquering fear. Everybody is walking around with serious worries and fears. And I wonder, since you wrote that book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People,"—and I still have my copy; somebody gave it to me when my brother was killed in a plane crash—I wonder if that experience, losing your beloved son Aaron at age fourteen, somehow prepared you and gave you the formula for facing the fears ahead in your life?

Harold Kushner: Yes, Lydia. I think it absolutely did. It's almost as if that experience—not losing Aaron, but losing Aaron and surviving it—vaccinated me against the fear of loss so that my wife and our daughter and I can say to ourselves: if we could get through that, we can get

through anything. And the first bit of advice I'd give to anybody who says I have to do something and I'm not sure that I'm up to it, is to ask them to look back at a time when they had to do something hard and they surprised themselves by how well they could do it. Lydia, for me that is the proof of God. Not any of those word games we learn in philosophy class, that human beings when asked to do something super-human, knowing that they don't have the ability to do it, somehow find the resources within themselves that were not there until the day they needed them, but God gave them the grace to do what they needed to do.

Daniel Pawlus: Dealing with tragedy and loss is really a part of our faith journey and part of our life. It deepens our experience, doesn't it?

Harold Kushner: It does. It's a painful growing up process. You leave the Santa Claus phase of religion behind. If I'm a good boy, I will get everything I ask for. You leave behind this simple minded business that if you put your mind to something you can make it happen, and you find yourself a citizen of a grown-up world, an undependable world, an unfair world, and yet a world so possible of reward and fulfillment for those who have the courage to live boldly in it.

Lydia Talbot: And you've worked out this wonderful reassurance that no matter what happens you can handle it. We can handle it. We're not alone. But I still have to ask you, what are the fears you're conquering at this moment?

Harold Kushner: I think what scares me right now is the amount of anger that is out there in the world. There are some things we should be angry at. We could not have gotten rid of racial segregation had people not been angry. We could not have brought limits to profits-seeking in business or to corruption in politics if people had not gotten angry. But this sense of free-floating rage, inappropriate anger, not only in politics, you hear it on the sports programs on the radio. "Fire the manager because we didn't win the World Series!" That's crazy. Why all this anger? I suspect if you scratched the anger you will find fear. You and I, Daniel, recognize anger is a man's way of dealing with fear because we don't want to show fear. And I think if you analyze below the fear what you will find is a sense of being out of control. When people sense that events important to them are beyond their control, they get scared and they get angry. And this I think is making ours a very tense, suspicious, vindictive, and impatient society. And it really upsets me.

Lydia Talbot: Is there a tinge of mannequinism out there, these attitudes of "us against them" that are a part of the fabric of the culture?

Harold Kushner: I think there is a lot of that. I think it's not so much us against them, it's us against somebody. Somebody is doing me bad. Somebody is spoiling things. Somebody is making money off this instead of me. Somebody is taking what should be mine. I don't know who that somebody is, but I'm looking for somebody to be angry at. In the days of the Cold War of us and the Russians, it was us against them. Today it is us against some unknowable foe. It's not just the terrorists and it's not just the Bernard Madoff's of the world, it's a whole conspiracy of people there stealing what should be mine and I'm angry at them. And it makes us suspicious of our neighbors, it makes us suspicious of our elected leaders. Nobody can govern a country where people have this attitude.

Daniel Pawlus: And Rabbi Kushner, doesn't that suspicion or that cynicism lead to a lack of belief in some ways? I wanted to ask you, and you've probably answered this question several times, what do you say to those people that struggle with the existence of God that allows these terrible things to happen in life? What kind of advice do you offer folks that have that trouble?

Harold Kushner: Daniel, I learned many years ago when somebody says to me I don't believe in God, to tell him, tell me about the God you don't believe in because there are a lot of gods I don't believe in either. Let's find out what you do believe and what you don't believe and maybe we'll find something we can both believe. I astonish people by saying, "You don't believe in a God who controls everything that happens? Well, neither do I." "You don't believe that this was the will of God?" A year after Katrina I went down to New Orleans to bring some consolation to families who had been washed out of their homes and I said to them, "I don't believe that God sent the hurricane to punish you. And if you don't believe it either, then we share the same faith." We believe in a God who is on our side, not on the side of the destructive waters. And I think people are refreshed to hear that. They want to be given a God who will help them and not punish them. Why we ever got painted into the corner of thinking of God as vindictive, as punitive. Look, there is a passage in Job. Remember all these terrible things have happened to Job and his friends come to say to him, "Don't lose faith, Job. God is always watching over us." And Job answers bitterly, "Yes, he's always watching over us to catch us and punish us." And that too is the theology people have.

Lydia Talbot: And Job, "that which I have feared has come upon me." That is the attitude that we have.

Harold Kushner: Yes. Right.

Lydia Talbot: I guess I have to go back to your message. Again, I see it as a reassurance for the people who have a fear death or dying. And you say the real fear is that perhaps they have wasted their lives or haven't lived their lives to the fullest. What do you hope will be your most important legacy, Rabbi?

Harold Kushner: Not the books I've written and the sermons I've given. My immortality will be that when my son was in pain and dying, I could make him laugh. I am prouder of that than anything I have done in my 75 years.

Lydia Talbot: How did you do that?

Harold Kushner: Tell him funny stories. Tickle him. Sit with him and hold his hand. Share some of his amusements. Make fun of some of the things that he made fun of. But it's not the content, Lydia, it's just the sense that somebody was there and saw him as other than a tragic figure and he deserved that.

Lydia Talbot: What caused your son's death?

Harold Kushner: He had one of the rarest diseases in the world. It's called progeria, the rapid aging syndrome. It takes the body of three-year-old boy and starts to turn it into an old man with arthritis and heart disease and all of these things. Since then, we've become very active in an organization to look for a cause and cure. In just a few years, with the help of the human genome project, we've identified the gene that causes it, we've got a treatment that will cure it in laboratory animals and we're testing it now on human beings. And we are very excited that instead of this just wringing our hands and saying, God, why do you let children suffer like this? we have said, God, give us the wisdom and the inspiration to be able to do something about it.

Daniel Pawlus: Rabbi Kushner, we've got about a minute left. Do you want to talk a little bit about the most recent book? What are you trying to accomplish with this most recent writing?

Harold Kushner: People are scared and they are less human than they need to be. It shrinks our souls. And I want to give them the faith, faith in themselves, faith in the world, faith in the accessibility of a God who will supply them with the courage they need. Yeah, what we're asked to do is hard. Do it. It will turn out better than you think.

Lydia Talbot: And to trust the journey.

Harold Kushner: That's right.

Lydia Talbot: I mean the importance of really trusting the journey and I sense that's what you're saying.

Harold Kushner: And that we're not doing it alone.

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Rabbi Harold Kushner.

REFLECTION INTRO

Lydia Talbot: We turn now to Tom McGrath, Vice President of Product Development for Loyola Press. He has a few words for us about facing "troubles."

REFLECTION

Tom McGrath: "I have known a lot of troubles in my life, most of which never happened."

Mark Twain said that, but I've lived it. I can be like the traveler driving down a desolate road on a stormy night who soon hears the thump, thump, thump of a flat tire. Realizing there's not a service station for miles, he gets out to fix the flat. And as he's getting the jack out of the trunk—with cold rain dripping down the back of his neck—he realizes there is no jack handle. After expressing his dismay in crude and colorful language, he wraps his coat tightly around him and heads off to find a service station.

Along the way he mutters to himself: "They probably won't have a jack handle to sell. And if they do, they'll make me pay a fortune for it." On and on, he works himself into a lather. Finally, he comes to a service station. As he walks through the door a pleasant young man says, "Good evening sir. How can I help you?" Our traveler demands, "Well, do you have a jack handle?"

The young man says, “Why yes sir, we do.” And our traveler screams, “Well you can take that jack handle and...!”

Well, I’ll leave it to your imagination what he said. But I know that I can act like that. No wonder Psalm 36 advises, “Do not fret—it only leads to evil.”

CLOSING

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Tom. And our thanks again to Harold Kushner, Naomi Pridjian and you for being with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you’ll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.