I am disturbed by the culture of fear that pervades our great nation today. We shudder when the terrorist alert goes to Orange. We allow ourselves to be caught up in fear-spreading propaganda by the TV news media. We keep our children indoors, and eye our neighbors suspiciously.

How has this happened? We are the nation of immigrants. We are the nation of people who left their homeland because they faced persecution for political or religious beliefs. We are the people who crossed the ocean under exceedingly dangerous and unhealthy conditions, to challenge their new country to give them a better life. My husband’s forefathers were Mennonites in Russia, persecuted for their religion. They immigrated to the United States and settled in Kansas to farm the wide open plains. These were brave people; these are our forefathers.

We have known far greater danger than we face today. The Cold War was a time of incomprehensible danger. By the early 1960’s the Soviet Union had achieved nuclear equality. This meant that each side could completely obliterate the other side. Our leaders at the time, starting with President Kennedy, responded with a policy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). The idea behind MAD is that a country’s population is best protected by leaving it vulnerable so long as the other side faced comparable vulnerabilities. In other words: whoever shoots first dies second. We lived under these conditions for nearly 20 years. Kids learned to hide under their school desks. Adults bought bomb shelters. Did we cower in fear then? I would argue no. The 1960’s were unique for the large number of people speaking up, speaking their minds, and bringing about change. And people did so freely, without fear of the Secret Service or FBI knocking on their door.

Nobel laureate William Faulkner once wrote that

> “Humanity is not so weak and timorous as to need to be free from fear; we need only use our capacity not to be afraid of it and relegate fear to its proper perspective.”

A hydrogen bomb dropped on New York City during the time of MAD would have killed 3,000,000 people, and that bomb would have been one of many to be dropped. Mutually Assured Destruction guaranteed massive destruction on both sides. But we were able to relegate fear to its proper perspective then, when the odds of individual harm were so very much higher.

What has changed? Why have we, a people who come from such strong stock; who are survivors in every sense of the word, allowed ourselves to be caught up in an ethos of fear and trembling? Why are we playing into the hands of those who desire to manipulate us?