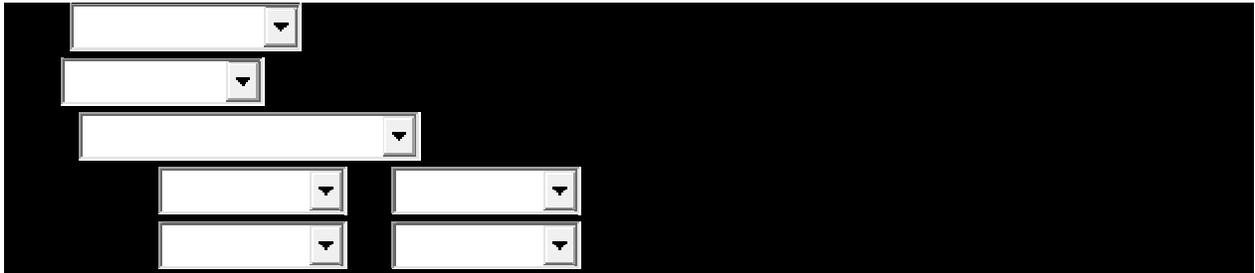


Teaching Carroll County students to fear

By Patricia Schultheis
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The Maryland Science Center is putting a new emphasis on a DIY approach to science education that teaches kids the scientific method of hypothesis testing. (Barbara Haddock Taylor, Baltimore Sun video) (Baltimore Sun)

Anyone who went to Catholic schools as I did, knows that there are lessons and then there are life lessons. From the good nuns, I learned self-control, to do what was expected and to appreciate that, as a member of a student body, I belonged to something greater than myself.

What the good nuns never taught me was fear. Rather, every day I observed them accepting new assignments, making tough decisions and embracing the admonition against fear that begins and ends the Christmas story.

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According to the Bible, when the angel Gabriel announced to the teen-aged Mary that she would give birth to a son, she became distraught. To comfort and reassure her, Gabriel told her to “Fear not.” And Mary listened. Rather than surrendering to her fear, Mary left her home in Nazareth and traveled first to Judah to see her cousin Elizabeth, then back to Nazareth and, finally, to Bethlehem.

“Fear not” — it’s a wonderful life lesson. One that has taken me from the alleys of Baltimore to the underground water system of ancient Rome, small towns in Cuba, and a labyrinthian bazaar in Istanbul. “Fear not” has taken me to these places safely. For 74 years.

But it’s a lesson the students of nearby Carroll County, sadly, may never learn. Instead, they are being taught the opposite. Acting on the recommendation of the county sheriff’s office, Carroll County school officials have halted all school-related trips to Baltimore, citing the city’s escalating violence.

And so, by their example, school officials have taught their young, impressionable charges to fear. They have taught them that less than an hour away is a place so frightening they dare not set foot in it. A place characterized by unpredictability and random violence. A place where even angels fear to tread.



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Never mind that such field trips might expand their minds or pique their curiosity. Or that no child has been harmed while on a field trip there. To pose these arguments against the school officials' ban would require the application of reason. So much easier to listen to the drumbeat of fear.

Fear is reflexive and reactive. It requires no thought, only feeling. Andy Smith, the Hampstead parent whose email resulted in the ban, says, "This is one of those things where being overly cautious is probably the best policy, rather than waiting for something to happen that you can't undo."

But Mr. Smith never identifies what that horrible "something" might be. His "something" remains unspecific and, being unspecific, can become generalized, can spread like a malicious fog to envelop Carroll County students in the most delimiting fear of all: fear of the other. And what an effective fear that particular fear is.

Fear of the other can be employed to keep children close-by and under control. Teach a child fear of the other and you teach him he is never safe, that danger is all around, and that he is helpless to protect himself.

But suppose some youngsters from Carroll County behaved as the shepherds did on that first Christmas when an angel appeared in the night and told them “You have nothing to fear!” And, just as those shepherds left their fields and went to Bethlehem, suppose those Carroll County youngsters traversed the 40 miles separating their county from the city, and suppose they met, not “the other,” but someone like themselves. Someone with similar dreams and aspirations. Someone with curiosity about the world and a commitment to make it a better place. Someone who introduced them to new possibilities and novel ideas. Suppose they met someone with whom they held hopes, beliefs and, yes, even fears, in common.

Suppose they discovered there is no “other.” There is only “us.” What a wonderful gift that would be. It’s possible. Stranger things have happened.

Two thousand years ago an angel visited a teen-aged girl. She listened to what he told her. She ventured forth. She traveled far. She checked her fear and changed the world.

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