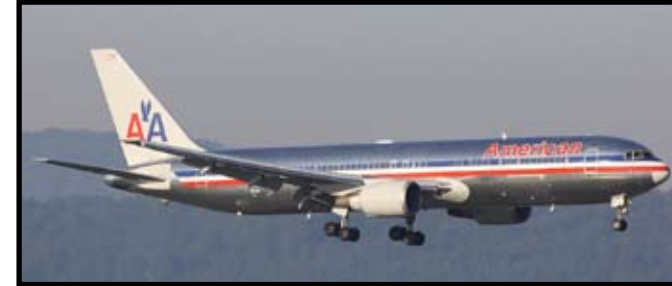


Face Your Fears!



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by Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

Every one of us knows the feeling of fear. Fear causes our heart to race and our breath to quicken. When we are afraid, our legs get rubbery; we get sweaty palms; we develop “cotton mouth,” and our hands tremble. When we enter an uncomfortable situation, our adrenal gland kicks in, and our “fight or flight” mechanism takes over. Our natural response is the desire to flee from any situation that causes anxiety. We don’t like the unpleasant feelings and naturally seek to avoid the situation that causes these feelings. Unfortunately, running actually *reinforces* the fear. The next time you encounter that same situation, the body will respond in similar fashion. The only way to overcome it is to put yourself into the dreaded environment and face it. In time, your response to the unwanted situation will diminish.

There are as many fears as there are situations in life. Understandable fears are situations such as being afraid of the dark, flying, public speaking, hospitals, and death. But people are also afraid of harmless things such as butterflies, kittens, and puppies. Fears are usually insidious and irrational.

HOW DO FEARS DEVELOP?

Fears usually develop through some type of traumatic event in your past. Perhaps someone held your head underwater while swimming. You began to panic because you couldn’t breathe. Now you have a fear of water. Just the thought of swimming in a pool or the ocean makes your heart beat faster.

I remember a traumatic event that happened to me when I was a high school freshman. We were in English class and were going up and down the rows reading paragraphs from a book. When my turn came, I began to read. As I did I lost my focus and started thinking about everyone around me. “What do they think of me as they hear my voice?” I wondered. Suddenly my heart started beating wildly, and I lost my ability to breathe normally. I had to stop reading because I couldn’t catch my breath. Everyone looked at me and I turned beet-red from embarrassment. I didn’t know it then, but for the first time in my life, I suffered a panic attack.

The next time I had to read in public the same thing happened. My heart beat wildly and I lost my breath. Then I began to have anticipatory anxiety. I dreaded the next time I would have to read in public and developed a social phobia. I avoided any circumstance where I would have to read, never mind speak (!) in public. Needless to say, it was hard to avoid these situations in my life so I lived with untold anxiety. The Bible teaches “fear has torment.” (1 Jn 4:18) I lived with constant worry. The

It is also important to reward yourself! This is called “positive reinforcement.” For example, whenever I face the fearful situation of reading or speaking in a tense environment for me, I reward myself later by eating chocolate or playing a game of golf. Even if I trembled while reading or preaching, I honor the fact that I tried and didn’t run. Remember, you are not after perfection here, but progression. You are trying to relearn your mind/body response to various uncomfortable situations. Rewarding yourself helps your mind positively seal the new learning process and increases your confidence and comfort level in the distressing situation the next time you enter it.

Running reinforces the fear. Exposing yourself to the situation gradually will give you the ability to manage your fearful feelings. The only way out is through! Remember, you don’t journey alone. *God is with you.*

The Spirit God has given us is an indomitable Spirit! Because God lives in you, you will have the desire to be free and broaden your circle of behaviors and achievements. You will have great distain for anything that enslaves you. You will find a new motivation to face your fears however they started in the first place. You will find new courage to expose yourself to the situations that cause you anxiety and distress. Great joy will come as you find yourself being bold instead of living with avoidance behavior that leads to despair. A new self-respect and appreciation of who you are as a person will dawn. God will help you become all you can be.

Just before Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, God spoke to him. Numerous times God said to him, “Be strong and very courageous. Be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for I am with you wherever you go. I will not fail you or forsake you.” (Jos. 1) Even though there were giants in the land and there was an uncertain future, they conquered and entered the Promised Land. It is time to possess the land! Because of God’s help, Joshua, David, Jesus, and countless others in the Bible faced their giants and conquered their fears.

Everyone has to face their giants in life. Too many back down, stay stuck, and never achieve their destiny. I pray you will be very courageous and strong knowing God is with you. You have a glorious destiny ahead of you. With God’s help, *you* will be victorious and become all you can be when you aggressively face your fears.

No matter what caused the phobia or fear in the first place, you can deal with the problem by gradually exposing yourself to it. Your mind is such that it responds consistently to various stimuli (for example driving over bridges). Say you had a bad experience crossing a bridge years ago. Now anytime you approach a bridge you begin to see yourself driving over the edge, falling, and crashing below. Even though you simply have an image in your mind, your body thinks it is real, and reacts with a quickened heart rate and high alert. You begin to feel vertigo.

If you avoid bridges because of fear, this avoidance behavior actually reinforces the phobia. But if you gradually face this fear, you can relearn a new response to it. Another term for gradual exposure therapy is “gradual desensitization.” As you put yourself into the anxiety producing circumstance, cling to what is real and reassuring, then you will desensitize your response to crossing bridges. This gradual therapy may occur with a trusted friend to journey with you. Eventually, however, you will need to face whatever your fear is without a partner to help you.

I stress the word “gradual.” You don’t have to do what terrifies you all at once. Perhaps you may simply want to drive close to a bridge. Examine your thoughts and images. Have someone talk to you about what is real. Try to stay connected to the real, reassuring reality. Examine and critique your false images and thoughts. Eventually you may want to drive with someone over the middle lane of the bridge so you can’t see what is below. Finally, in time, you will want to attempt driving across by yourself. All this can be done in steps as you are comfortable and corresponding to what you can handle. It also helps to observe a mentor. Watch another person drive over a bridge and observe their normal behavior. Have your partner drive you across. Notice how they handle it. Observing how others handle your fearful situation can help you mimic their calm behavior.

Once you begin mastering your situation, you must be consistently aggressive. Driving across once, reading in public occasionally, or flying once in a blue moon won’t do it. You must continue being aggressive in your struggle with fear. Try to do it often and consistently. Remember, it is okay to feel the fear when you are in the situation, but you must press through the feelings and do it even though you feel afraid. Eventually the feelings will lessen and allow you to do the behavior with greater ease. You will have relearned your behavior toward any situation. Complete freedom may or may not come. Your goal isn’t total liberation. Rather, you must be able to manage your fear in the situation and function even though you feel afraid.

root cause of my dread was that I feared what people would think of me. I wanted everyone to like and respect me. I didn’t want to be critiqued negatively or judged harshly. Most of all, I didn’t want to reject myself. “What I feared came upon me.” (Job 3:25) The very thing I feared became an overwhelming obstacle in my life.

ANATOMY OF FEAR

I notice that contained in the word “fear” is the word “ear.” In any fear, we listen to the worst scenario and our thoughts go awry. Thoughts such as, “I can’t do it; everyone is looking at me; I will die, or I can’t make it” overwhelm us and cause the body to overreact. Usually our imagination kicks in and we see pictures of a harmless puppy biting us, or being trapped in an elevator, or driving a car off a bridge. We fear the worst which leads to panic and the development of a phobia. One phobia can spread to other areas unless the fear is faced and aggressively pursued.

Some years after I developed this phobia, God touched my life. I was filled with the Holy Spirit. As Paul told Timothy, “God did not give us a Spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind.” (2 Tim. 1:7) I wish I could say that God spoke and “zzzt” suddenly I was healed and my fears were taken away. Perhaps that happens for some, but not for me. Rather, a different miracle happened. Because of the Holy Spirit within me, I started to have the motivation to address my fears and face them. Although putting myself in fearful situations was very distressing to me, I found that facing my fears was the means of conquering them! The Holy Spirit is a courageous spirit and I was given the energy to stand up to the “bully” that was making me run. This was extremely distressing for me, but eventually led to the unfolding of God’s destiny for my life.

Unfortunately, many people allow fear to rule their lives. Because people are afraid of what others think of them, or because they fear failure or harm, many live small, unfulfilled, bordered lives. Who they are and what they achieve is only a vestige of what they could be. God has gifted every person with talents and abilities. It is such a shame that most will not realize their potential because they succumb to the voice of fear. *Fear is a destiny destroyer.* I can’t tell you how many of my golf scores have been ruined because of fear. Most would rather live “safe than sorry” and end up being sorry. In order to live a passionate, fulfilling life, you must summon courage, be bold, and press on against your fears. Yes, life is dangerous, but I’ve determined that I am not going to live on the sidelines. I will do what it takes to live a passionate, fulfilling life. I’d rather die living fully than living a pathetic, unfulfilled, and unhappy life.

FACE YOUR FEAR!

Jesus had to face fear in his life in order to fulfill God's destiny for his life. A wonderful story illustrating this point is Mark 4:35-5:20. Until now Jesus had been ministering to the Jewish people. He decided to step out and go to the "other side" of the Sea of Galilee. The Eastern side was Gentile (non-Jewish) territory. For the first time, Jesus was going to expand his ministry and reach out to foreigners. As he was travelling across the sea in the boat, a violent storm (called a sharkia) came against him. Rather than turn back and retreat in fear, Jesus stood up against the storm. It is interesting how Jesus spoke to the storm. The word in the Greek for "Peace, Be still" is "Be muzzled." It was as if Jesus was commanding a ravenous, snarling dog.

The truth is evil didn't want Jesus to expand his ministry and was throwing everything at Jesus to stop him. Satan was trying to scare Jesus away. The first thing Jesus did when he arrived on the other side was to set a man free from a legion of demons that was causing self-hate.

I have a history with this story. I proclaimed this long Gospel at our seminary one afternoon. The chapel was full with many of my teachers, peers, and directors in attendance. My fear was so great that I lost all of my saliva and had trouble pronouncing any words. My homily was weak and powerless. I felt like a failure and beat myself up pretty bad afterward. I realized later that evil was trying to thwart God's will for my life. Satan was using the storm of performance anxiety, fear of failure, and self-recrimination against me. He tried to stop me early in my seminary days. He knew that if he could get to me, then I would never have the effectual ministry I now have.

I remember another time before I even entered the seminary. I was proclaiming the reading at morning prayer. There was only one priest in attendance and he had a German shepherd lying beside his chair in his rectory. The reading was long and I began to panic as I read. The lack of oxygen made my voice sound strange. The dog, which knew me well, started to growl because he didn't recognize my voice. For years the enemy used that memory of the growling dog against me. Whenever I was about to read in public, I would mentally hear that dog. In order to come against it, I use the words of Jesus, "Be muzzled!" I am able to overcome with God's help. I continue to face scary situations, but I don't run from them. The evil one will use many types of strategies to keep you in a manageable, little box. In order to live a

significant life, you will have to face numerous storms. However, what lies on the other side is your destiny!

The keynote of our late Holy Father John Paul II was "Be Not Afraid!" He proclaimed those words almost everywhere he went. Someone once said there are 365 instances of "Fear not" in the Bible -- one for every day of the year! Fear is always accompanied by bodily reactions. When we are told not to fear, this doesn't mean we won't feel fear, but that we shouldn't succumb to it. When David fought with the arrogant, brash-talking Goliath, the Bible says David "ran quickly" toward the battle line. (1 Sam 17:48) I think he hastened because if he thought too much about Goliath's size and terrifying words, he would have succumbed to crippling fear. He was able to win the battle, even though he was afraid. *Similarly, you can do what you need to do even though you feel fear.* You can do what you need to do even though your knees are knocking, your voice is shaking, and your heart is beating wildly. I remember one woman who came to confession was so afraid her left leg was visibly shaking. Yet, she confessed even though fearful! You can do it also.

VICTORY OVER FEAR

In order to be victorious when it comes to fear of any kind, you must *begin to confront it*. I think the Twelve Step wisdom is crucial here. First, admit to yourself (and, if you can, others) that you have a problem with fear. Second, admit that you are powerless over your fears. It is God who has the power and God alone can help you through this. Third, surrender to God and allow him to help you through the process. As you bring God into your struggle, you will find new courage to face your fears and discover a redeeming relationship with God in the process.

It is comforting to know that you don't need to know or remember the traumatic event which caused your fear in the first place. Remembering this event and evaluating it is helpful, but not necessary in recovering from fear. The emphasis in psychology now is to address what happens in the context of your "fear moment." In other words when you enter into the situation that causes you dread (flying, elevators, public speaking, etc.), what is going on in your thoughts and emotions? It is this "swirl of thoughts" (some psychologists call this the "phobogenic process") that needs to be examined. Paying attention to and changing these overwhelming thoughts and images leads to freedom.