



### CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH FEAR AND OTHER INNER DEMONS

Today's Gospel begins with the exhortation, "Fear not, little flock." Elsewhere Jesus said, "Fear is useless, what is needed is trust."

Fear is a huge topic and I have much to learn about its nature, its extent and how to deal with it in a constructive way. The following are some miscellaneous thoughts on fear. If you have insights and thoughts on this very important emotion not expressed here, I would love to hear from you.

Fear is the feeling of anxiety caused by the presence or pending presence of danger. The danger could be *physical* (fear of an abusive spouse), some health issue or *spiritual* (fear of losing God, fear of going to hell), *mental* (fear of losing one's mind), *emotional* (fear of losing loved ones), *moral* (if we are doing wrong, we may fear getting caught).

We fear all kinds of things: we fear losing our health, losing our jobs, losing a family member or good friend. We fear living alone, fear dying alone, fear rejection, failure, losing money. We may fear intimacy or being abandoned.

Many of our fears go unrecognized because, like other unpleasant emotions, we *repress* them. Sometimes we, especially men, *deny* our fears. It is not macho to feel fear. We may wear "No Fear" T-shirts to hide our fear.

#### ***Fear, the enemy of growth, freedom and joy***

Nothing hinders our spiritual and psychological growth as much as fear. For example, our simple fear of doing new things can keep us spiritually and emotionally immature. I believe a main reason (not of course the only reason) why many men and women do not go on a men or women's retreat weekend is fear, fear of the unknown, fear of leaving their comfort zone, fear of sharing their thoughts and feelings, fear of feeling inadequate. Our fears hold us in bondage and prevent us from experiencing the freedom of the children of God. Fear also steals our joy. It is hard to live joyfully if a bunch of fears are running havoc in our inner being.

#### ***Fear and Anger***

Fear is often connected to anger and confused with it. A man loses his job and says, "I didn't feel fear when I lost my job. I was angry." Fear is a very natural reaction after being fired. What is going to happen now?

Psychologist, Dr. Michael Cavanaugh writes: "Most angry feelings rebound off feelings of fright. Most 'hostile' people are frightened people; most 'arrogant' people are frightened; most 'snobbish' people are frightened. When we can understand this, it opens up a new dimension of relating to ourselves and to others. If when I'm angry, I can ask myself; "Underneath my anger, what part of me is frightened by what just happened?" and 'What just occurred that threatened my self-concept?' I will have more data with which to understand myself and to communicate this fear to the source of the threat. We will also relate differently with one another if we view the person as frightened rather than hostile. If we view a person as hostile, we often react with hostility, reinforcing his or her fears and generating more hostility. If people are relating on the anger level when the problem lies on the fear level, a successful resolution of the conflict is unlikely. This is not to say that all anger can be traced to fear, but a good deal of it can."

#### ***Seven Suggestions for Dealing with Fear***

- ***Name the fear.*** If the fear is not clear to you take time to *name* what it is you are afraid of. Sometimes we just feel fearful but we don't know why. Taking time to *name* exactly what we are anxious or fearful about can be very helpful. We may discover that the thing causing a lump in our stomach is nothing to be fearful about. Sometimes it is easy enough to pinpoint the reason why we are fearful, but often many of our fears are related to childhood experiences, now buried in our subconscious. For example, fear about relationships may be related to bad and painful childhood relational experiences. Fears about God are nearly always related to our early formation. Some counselors, through the use of hypnosis, can get their clients to remember experiences that are buried in *their* subconscious.
- ***Own the fear.*** This is a very important part of dealing with any unpleasant feelings. All too often we deny or repress our fears or minimize their presence. A key step to dealing with our feelings is the clear and honest owning of them. It is a good and healthy thing to say out loud: "I feel scared about . . .", "I am fearful of . ." "I am as mad as hell at . . .", "I am jealous . . ."
- ***Befriend or be present to your fears or other tough feelings.*** Psychologists and spiritual guides encourage us to 'befriend our shadow' or dark side or that part of us that

we tend to deny or keep in a secret closet and never relate to. The more we deny or repress our shadow side, the more power it will have in our lives. Whether we like it or not, un-dealt with losses, hurts and fears will impact in negative ways our relationships and other aspects of our lives. Our shadow or dark side (fears, angers, hates, jealousies) all have powerful ability to steal our joy and peace, keep us in bondage and prevent us from living free and joyful lives.

How can we befriend our shadow or fears? First by admitting their presence. Second, by being present to them. Counselors often encourage clients “to sit with the fear”, take time to feel the feeling of fear. Uncomfortable or unruly feelings and obsessions seek our attention just like an unruly child seeks the attention of a parent. When we take time to be simply present to a feeling or part of us that we are alienated from, we are taking a concrete step to befriend a part of us that we have developed a hostile relationship with.

Journaling has been writing called the ‘best form of self-therapy’ and it costs nothing. The simple exercise of putting on a page our uncomfortable feelings is an excellent way to befriend them and come to terms with them. Some of you may have my book *Prayer—A Handbook for Today’s Catholics*. On page 35 you will find a simple example of my attempt to dialog with a feeling of anger. When we develop the skill of befriending those parts of us that we tend to reject (which includes body parts), we take a significant step to move forward in our spiritual and psychological growth.

- *Share your fear with a trusted friend.* The decision to share an uncomfortable feeling with a trusted friend can be very helpful. When we take this step we are bringing our fear into the light of day versus keeping it hidden in the deep recesses of our hearts.
- *Pray for and develop the virtues of courage and trust.* You have heard the saying: “*Pray as if all depended on God. Act as if all depended on one’s self*”. When faced with fear, pray for courage to face the fear and take action and pray for the trust needed to believe that ‘all things work for good for those who love the Lord’.

Like many people I have had to struggle with fear all of my life, fear of new experiences, fear of failure and rejection, fear of conflict and confrontation, fear of getting emotionally close to another and fear of abandonment, fear of God etc.

The two virtues or dispositions that have helped me to deal with my fears are courage and trust. When I

am facing some fear, I am also being called to develop my courage and trust muscles. Courage and trust help me.

- To try new experiences
- Confront and deal with a difficult relationship or situation.
- Write a column, preach a homily that I may feel fearful or timid about writing or preaching.
- Share my inner thoughts and experiences with others
- Trust that God is in charge and nothing can destroy me, not even death.

Dealing with our fears daily offers us the opportunities to grow spiritually and psychologically. One person said: “*I have been terrified all my life, but that has not stopped me from doing everything I wanted to do.*”

For many men and women, deciding to go on a Men and Women’s weekend is a decision to face and overcome a fear. Volunteering to give a talk on a weekend is another decision for many to overcome some fear.

- *Take action.* We can allow our fears to paralyze us or we can confront them. Taking action in the face of fear will help to build our courage. The choice is always ours. And the choice we make will determine whether we grow spiritually and psychologically or whether our growth remains stunted.

Take for example the fear of water and heights. Many people fear one or both. We can allow our fears to paralyze us and rob us of the joy that can be ours from swimming or floating in water or enjoying the beautiful things we can see from high places or we can confront our fear and take the steps we need to take to deal with the fear that hinders our spiritual and psychological growth, that hinders us from fully enjoying the life God has given to us.

So for example, when we take steps to overcome our fear of water, we befriend and integrate into our being something that we were previously afraid of. What was preciously an enemy has become our friend. The same is true as we work with past failures, hurts, inner wounds etc. We face them and do whatever it takes to bring healing to those areas of our lives from which we were alienated. Every time we take steps to face fears, deal with hurts and past failures, we are facilitating our spiritual and psychological growth. Failure to deal with our losses, hurts, inner wounds, fears, jealousies and failure is a decision not to grow spiritually and psychologically.

It has been well said that we are the sum total of our decisions. Daily we make decisions that either help or hinder our growth physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually.

*Entrust Your Fears to the Lord.* There are a lot of potential or real fears that we have no control over - job security, health (even some folks who take good care of their health die in accidents), material security, fears about loved ones close by or living elsewhere. These fears we must seek to give to the Lord. We might pray for and work at developing the attitude that says: "Yes, I may lose my job, but who knows what door will open to me if this happens?" "I may lose my spouse, but many of my friends have lost theirs and seem to cope pretty well. I trust my faith in God will get me through this loss just as it got me through past losses." A well-cultivated faith in God helps us to sit before him and let go of our fears to him. With a strong faith, we can say with the psalmist, "though I walk in the valley of darkness, I *fear no evil* for you are with me."

Commenting on today's gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes: *Fully aware that fear is at the root of many human difficulties, Jesus counseled his followers to live unfettered by its grip. Fear of want can foster greed and instigate hoarding. Fear of the unknown can instill a cowardice that refuses to live freely and fully. Inordinate fear of God can stifle the ability to enter into a mature and personal relationship with him. Fear of enemies, more often than not, engenders more of them. Fear of the future relegates the frightened one to live in the past, finding false refuge in nostalgia. As a remedy for these crippling and twisted fears, Jesus recommended faith and trust in the God who loves each believer, sees to every need and wills only goodness and blessings.*

Crippled by polio, living in the Great Depression and being threatened by the Third Reich, Franklin D. Roosevelt had much to fear. Instead of being fearful, Roosevelt said at his Inaugural Address, "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*" Someone else reflecting on fear writes:

*Fear may be compared to a fungus*

*Which grows in the dark,*

*But when exposed to the light,*

*Dries up and disintegrates.*

*"When we live fearfully, our pace slows.*

*And we expect to be injured.*

*We expect to find demons where there are none.*

*What we do not understand, we tend to fear.*

*What we fear we tend to devalue.*

*What we devalue soon becomes a devil.*

"Fears are educated into us, and can, if we wish be educated out." *Dr. Karl Menniger.*

"Fear is a good counselor and victory over fear is the first spiritual duty of man." *Nikolai Berdyaev*

"Do not fear God, who wishes you no harm, but love him a great deal, who wishes you so much good."

*St. Francis of Sales*

Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyses, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable— and, most of all, fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.

*Harry Emerson Fosdick*

### *Reflection Questions*

- Can you *name* your three strongest fears?
- Can you name a *fear* that is presently hindering your spiritual and psychological growth?
- What helps you the most to deal with your fears? Has anything *not* mentioned in this column helped you? If so, please share with me.
- How do you generally deal with your fears? Is it your tendency to ignore and deny fear? Or do you tend to face your fears and do what you can to deal with them in a constructive way?

### *Exercise*

Name one fear that you presently struggle with and would like to overcome. See if the steps suggested in this column can help you to deal with the fear. If the steps do not help, consider going to see a counselor or come see me to see if I can help you.

Have a great week

*Le Sarah*