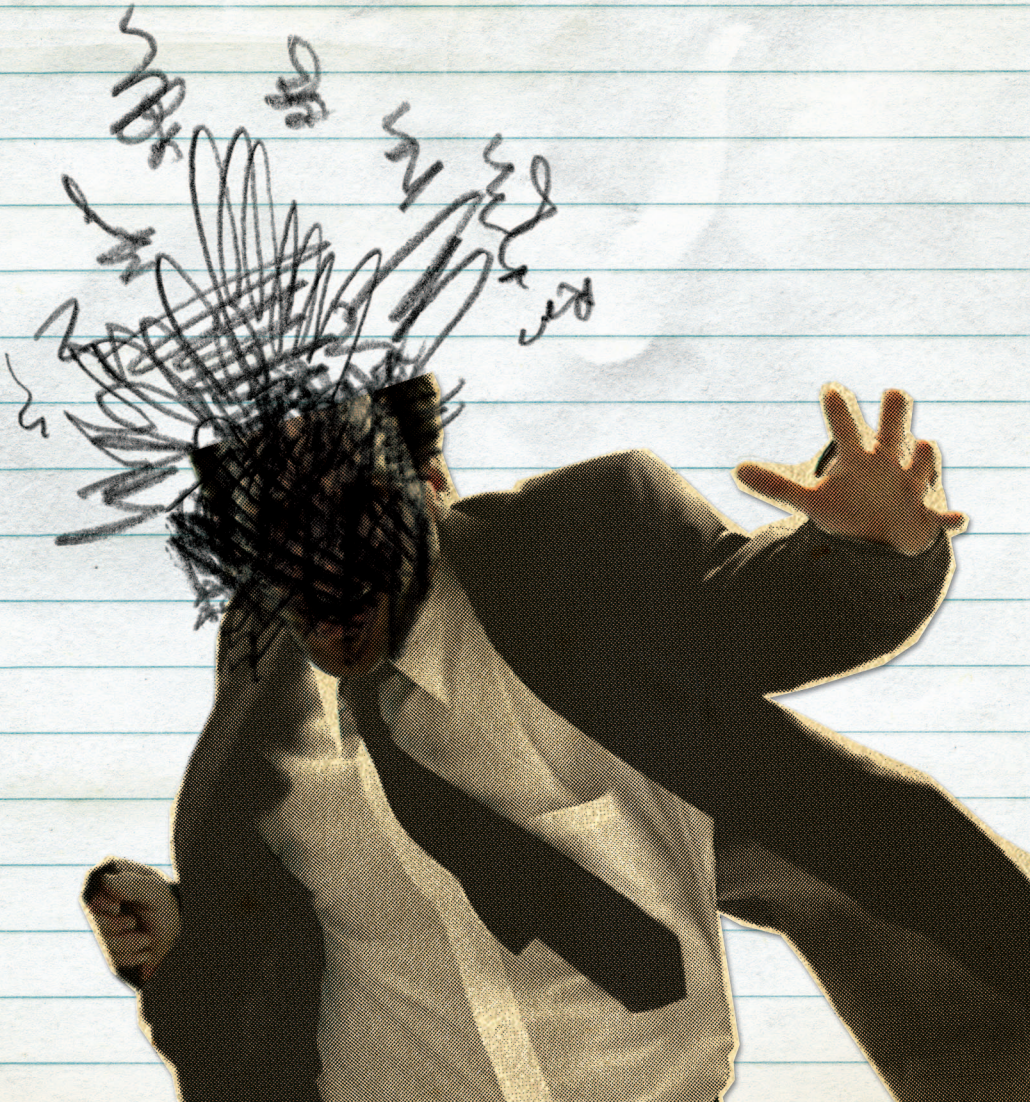


edward t. welch

RUNNING SCARED

fear, worry, and the God of rest



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New Growth Press
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To J. Alan Groves

*A wise pastor
A loving father
My dear friend
(1952–2007)*

EDWARD T. WELCH is the author of such best-selling titles as: *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*, *Blame It on the Brain*, and *When People Are Big and God Is Small*. He received a PhD in Counseling Psychology (Neuropsychology) from the University of Utah, and an MDiv from the Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, PA. Welch is a licensed psychologist and works as a counselor, faculty member, and director of the School of Biblical Counseling at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation in Glenside, PA. His written work and speaking ministry, which are characterized by sound biblical exposition and paired with dynamic practical application, are in great demand by today's modern church. Ed is married to Sheri and has two amazing daughters. He is also the glad owner of a growing guitar collection and competes in the Master's swim event where he happily placed fourth in the country.

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PREFACE

I HAVE LOOKED forward to writing about fear for years. I came close to it in *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, but all I could do was skirt the edges and savor the possibilities. I touched on it in *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*, but since fear is not relevant to everyone who struggles with depression, all I did was raise a signpost and mention that there are beautiful words of comfort up ahead for fearful people.

Now I can graze on those beautiful words.

Like most writing projects, this book is aimed squarely at myself. Although I can be angry or melancholy, I am a fear specialist. In this I have found that I am not alone. Not everyone is a fear specialist, but there is no doubt that every single person who ever lived is personally familiar with fear. It is an inescapable feature of earthly life. To deny it is . . . well . . . to deny it.

I was initially intrigued by Luke’s account of Jesus’ command: “Do not worry.” There was a time when the biblical commands “Do not worry” and “Do not be afraid” put a quick end to hopes that there was anything attractive to say to fearful people. It seemed as if the biblical counsel was “The law says don’t fear, so don’t. End of story.” But there are at least two different ways to say “Don’t worry.” One is a judicial warning, which has a threatening overtone; the other is a parental encouragement, which aims to

comfort. Scripture has both, but Luke placed the accent on parental encouragement. Those warm words from the loving Father were all I needed to notice God's passion for comforting fearful people.

Of course, Scripture took me to new places. I didn't anticipate being taught how to pray or how being an active peacemaker is a sure-fire way to know peace. I also didn't anticipate how the reading, writing, and arithmetic of the Christian life—Bible reading, prayer, and fellowship—would be the rudiments for our battle with fear and worry.

With that in mind, please don't think of the Scripture passages that you will find throughout these meditations to be mere filler. They are essential food. You probably already know most of them, but don't let your familiarity be an occasion for speed reading.

The Table of Contents will give you an outline, but this book is not exactly linear. It isn't a series of steps to follow. Instead, it is thirty meditations linked by a common theme. After you read the "Initial Observations," read a chapter a day. Don't read the next chapter until you have spoken to someone about what you just read.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE TIME IS COMING soon when the only words I will be able to write or speak are "thank you." I am becoming more indebted to other people every day:

To the Board of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), who approved and supported the sabbatical time needed to complete this book.

To my CCEF colleagues—David Powlison, Paul Tripp, Winston Smith, Bill Smith, Tim Lane, and Mike Emler—whose ideas I shamelessly steal.

To Jayne Clark, who initially proposed CCEF's sabbatical plan.

To the CCEF staff, who make things run more smoothly in my absence.

To Westminster Theological Seminary, for the privilege of teaching so many wise and loving students.

To Sue Lutz, whose tireless efforts to shape my ideas and words continue to humble me.

To my daughters, Lindsay and Lisa, who have a part in everything I do but, as fellow fear specialists, even more so in this project.

To my wife, Sheri, who was always happy to speak with me about the ideas in this book and to read cumbersome sections. Somehow, she knows exactly when to laugh at my various anxieties and when to share my burdens. She should be listed as coauthor.

PART ONE

initial observations

PART ONE looks at our fears and worries with an unaided eye. Here is what stands out upon simple inspection.

- Fear and worry run deep in us all.
- Fear and worry have meaning. They say something.
- Fear and worry say that the world is dangerous.
- Fear and worry reveal us. They reveal the things that we love and value.

A WORLD OF FEAR

I like to scare people, and people like to be scared.

—STEPHEN KING

LOOK AT CHILDREN, see all humanity. Whereas adults cover up and hide, children are unadorned and open. They lack sophisticated facades and cultural trappings that quietly add layer upon layer to our adult experience. With children, you get the real thing.

Here is what you see.

Children are profoundly needy but stubbornly independent: “No!” enters their vocabulary right after “Dada” or “Mama.”

They can be delightful and charming yet selfish and manipulative: “Mine!” comes right after “No!”

When “Mine!” doesn’t work, they throw temper tantrums, and they do this without ever having witnessed adults banging their fists on the floor and screaming bloody murder. Children don’t have to learn anger.

Instead, anger can spring spontaneously from their already nascent minds.

They can tell lies, straight-faced, staring right at you, without blinking. Here again children need no teachers. They can lie without ever having been lied to.

And even if they live in an unassailable fortress, protected round the clock by loyalists who ward off all robbers, ghosts, and monsters, with loved ones always within calling distance, video cameras and alarms perpetually set, nightlights on before dusk, shielded from Stephen King, Walt Disney, Saturday morning cartoons, and all things creepy, they will—guaranteed—be afraid. Somehow, without anyone telling them, they know that they live in a world that isn't safe.

FEAR IN CHILDREN

One of the prized gifts of childhood is a grand imagination. Give a child any object and play happens. Dolls become treasured offspring; sticks transform into swords, guns, light sabers, and telescopes. The problem is that, coupled with a fearful heart, these wonderful imaginations can also envision the worst. Watch a child's imagination on the loose and you feel like you are watching an eight-year-old behind the wheel of an Indy race car. A dark room is all they need for their imagination to start careening out of control. Suddenly, clocks are watching them, as yet unclassified creatures scurry around inside the walls, and behind the closet door lurks a world of evil.

Consider Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*. He is certain that as soon as his parents are out of sight and the lights are off, there is something drooling under his bed. At a moment's notice—just a flick of the switch—young Calvin goes from world-class superhero to the local under-the-bed monster's supper. And, no doubt, he speaks on behalf of his peers.

If children's imaginations don't take them to these scary places, bedtime stories will. "Hansel and Gretel," "Beauty and the Beast," *Things That*

Go Bump in the Night. Why are there so many scary stories for children? Yes, in classic fairy tales the good people prosper and justice wins in the end. But who is to say if we are good enough to identify with Cinderella? What if we aren't? And even if we think we might be spared the witch's oven, we have still discovered that there are horrible things out there.

Consider these excerpts from popular children's stories from around the world. Notice how they hint of bad things to come and partner with the anxieties of even the most secure child.

No one in the family ever went near the attic. They hoped the eerie sounds up there were made by branches scraping against the house. But they took no chances. And that was wise, for up in the attic an evil demonness awaited them.¹

Nothing subtle about this opening to a popular German children's story. The strange sounds present in every house have just been identified, and no sane child will ever go up *any* stairs without an exorcist or parent. Forget about even closing his eyes for the next week! The attic apparition has nothing to do but wait until the family sleeps.

Long ago in China there lived an old man with a heart of stone. He drove away every beggar who came to his door.²

This story starts off innocently enough. You might anticipate a morality tale about generosity. You aren't expecting the heebie-jeebies along the way. But this old man soon becomes a beggar himself. (Scary stories love symmetry.) And before he meets his end, which is assured, you will . . . not close your eyes for the next week.

Once upon a time there was a widow who had a daughter of her own and a stepdaughter. Whenever her own daughter said or did anything, the

woman would pat her on her head and say, “Clever girl!” But no matter how hard the stepdaughter tried, she was always being called “foolish” or “lazy” by the woman, who often scolded her and sometimes beat her.³

In this case you certainly don’t want to be the widow *or* her daughter. Their foolishness will be exposed, and then the axe will fall, perhaps literally. Meanwhile the stepdaughter, who (you *hope*) represents yourself, will marry someone rich and handsome.

Anya finally declared, “I am not afraid of anything!”⁴

This is a sure sign that in about three pages Anya will have the bejeebers scared out of her. Most likely she, too, will be dead in the end, and you will have the creeps. And notice the logic of the story. If you are *not* afraid, you are foolish and bad things happen. The only choice is, for our safety’s sake, to be filled with dread.

What is going on? These are stories you can find in every known culture. Maybe Stephen King is right—we like to scare and be scared. After all, who hasn’t enjoyed jumping out on an unsuspecting friend and saying, “BOO!”? And what American hasn’t voluntarily entered a fun house or actually paid money to be scared on an amusement ride? As long as we know that there is really nothing to be scared about, we like to be scared. The adrenaline makes us feel more vital. A good scare can beat an extra-large coffee.

But we are talking about young children here. They don’t yet take joy in scaring others or being scared (at least not until they are incited by mischievous siblings), and they don’t need the extra energy. What else is going on? Why do their imaginations go so quickly to scary things, even if they have no acquaintance with them? And why do they seem to *like* scary stories?

One possibility is that children are scared *before* they ever encounter their first scary story, in which case the function of the story is to validate pre-existing primal fears. In other words, children already feel as if there are

dangers lurking in every dark room. These fears came with the package of being human. The scary stories don’t create fear; they simply offer explanations for it: “Yes, there are reasons why you are afraid. You feel *as if* there are monsters under the bed, and you are right. There really *are* monsters under the bed.” Children might not be pleased to discover that the noise in the wall is a boogeyman, but at least they have an explanation for their fear, and now they understand why they need a nightlight. (Monsters, of course, are strictly nocturnal.)

Fear is natural to us. We don’t have to learn it. We experience fear and anxiety even before there is any logical reason for them. Children’s fears predate their acquaintance with scary stories.⁵

FEAR IN TEENS

When children become teens, they take their scary stories with them, but these fortified stories are no longer cute. Gone are the good fairies and kind strangers with unusual powers. Now it is just in-your-face horror: *Goosebumps*, Freddy Krueger, Chuckie, and chainsaws.

A few teens—maybe two or three—refuse to watch these movies. They already have plenty of fears. Why add to them? The rest seem to *need* these nightmarish tales. For some, fear makes them feel alive. It functions in the same way as extreme amusement rides. The guys laugh and the girls scream, which is one reason the guys laugh. But the horror genre serves more purposes than an adrenaline rush or getting a date to hold onto you during an especially chilling scene. These stories say, “It isn’t safe out there! Something is watching!” And they are more accurate than they know. Being good, which was your protection in the children’s stories, doesn’t seem to matter now. Whatever is lurking out there seems incapable of judging between who has been naughty and who has been nice. It has no prejudices or preferences. Teens are not so naïve as to think that their own good deeds will somehow protect them.

Maybe teenagers will be protected if they act out their fears. At least that seems to be the logic behind Halloween. How many emotions have their own national holidays? All around the world there are variations of Halloween. People dress up and do something either to scare off or to make peace with the spirits that allegedly walk among us. In the United States, as secular and scientific as we think we are, the spiritual overtones of Halloween are right on the surface. The costumes are increasingly macabre. A quick walk down the street and you see zombies, mutilated bodies, devils, and your walking nightmares. The costumes are not exclusively ghoulish; there are adorable angels galore. But the angels have a purpose. Angels are spiritual beings, sent from God to protect us. They are part of the supernatural ethos of the evening. Fear is, indeed, a spiritual matter.

FEAR IN ADULTS

As adulthood nudges its way into our lives, one would assume we would put away childish fears and anxieties. But have we? Though adults might not go door-to-door to ask for candy, more dress up for Halloween and Mardi Gras events than ever before. Prime-time television programs feature vampires, mediums, ghosts, and other visitors from the afterlife. The murder mystery is requisite beach reading. Adult horror stories take our senses to the limit. The evening news continues to be a horror reality show. Although there are occasional attempts at positive news, no one tunes in if the news gets too warm and fuzzy. As a culture, young and old, we are groping for a venue to portray the unreasonable, mysterious, risky, and downright scary essence of daily life.

Our cities have random shootings and the threat of *jihad* adds to our anxieties. It would seem that increased freedom would help, but it doesn't. Both oppression and freedom can incite fear. Freedom resolves the fear and anxiety associated with persecution and oppression, but it increases the fear of personal failure, which is one reason Soren Kierkegaard said that anxiety

is the dizziness of freedom. With freedom come more choices, which mean more opportunities to get it wrong. Freedom or oppression—pick your poison. They both contribute to our fears and anxieties.

In short, nothing happens to assuage our fears when we turn twenty, and much in our society assumes that fact. Politicians, for example, count on them. It is axiomatic that the candidate who taps into our fears is the one who wins. Once it was the Communist menace. Now politicians predict fiscal catastrophe or increased terrorism or WMDs—unless, of course, they are elected.

All this happens in countries where there is relative peace and prosperity. How much more intense fear must be in less stable regions! Consider those living in the Sudan, where Omar al-Bashir's campaign of ethnic and religious persecution killed over 180,000 in two years. Over two million were driven from their homes; the burning of villages lessened only because there were so few villages left to burn. Such oppression breeds paralytic fear.

As we might guess, far from gradually becoming extinct in adulthood, our fears increase throughout our lives. What was once a small family of worries quietly conducts an aggressive breeding program to become a teeming community of palpable fears and private anxieties. The code by which fear and anxiety live is primal: multiply. As we possess more things, care about more people, accumulate more bad experiences, and watch *Fear Factor* and the evening news, it is as if we absorb fear. If they are not obvious in your own life, perhaps it's because you have been living in a war zone your entire life. At first you noticed every gunshot. After a while the mayhem blends in with the rustle of the trees, the TV, and the children playing in the other room. Fear gradually becomes the background noise of everyday life.

Yet it doesn't take much for that background noise to jump to the forefront of our attention. When the town fathers in Sarasota, Florida, announced a proposal to place a few lifelike clowns around town, subterranean fears erupted.

When coulrophobes [those who fear clowns] there learned that city officials were about to approve a plan to put 70 life-size fiberglass clowns in the downtown area, they inundated agencies with calls, e-mails, and in-person protests.⁶

The proposal went down in flames because one in seven of us is a certifiable coulrophobe.

Ask a friend if he or she has a particular phobia and your own fears won't seem quite as silly. There are names for literally thousands of fears.

Have you ever read a book or seen a movie about submarines? Stories such as Alistair MacLean's *Ice Station Zebra* are scary stories for adults because they arouse our claustrophobia, fears of suffocation, and fears of being buried alive. The submarine doubles as a coffin. The children's writer, Hans Christian Anderson, was always afraid he would be buried alive. His practice was to leave a note on his bedside table explaining that he may "seem dead" but that he was merely sleeping.

There was a time when adults were neatly categorized into one of two groups: you were either neurotic or psychotic. Psychotic meant that you were out of touch with reality and afraid; neurotic meant that you were *in* touch with reality and afraid. Today we are much more enlightened and offer many more diagnostic possibilities. There are scores of psychiatric disorders from which we can select. Yet by far the largest category remains fear. Notice how fear and anxiety are central to this list of modern psychopathologies.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Generalized anxiety disorder | Panic disorder |
| Agoraphobia | Paranoid schizophrenia |
| Social phobia | Other specific phobias |
| Obsessive-compulsive disorder | Post-traumatic stress disorder |
| Sexual aversion disorder | Nightmare disorder |
| Sleep terror disorder | Paranoid personality |
| Avoidant personality | Separation anxiety disorder |
| Persecutory delusions | |

About one in ten experiences more extreme versions of these problems. But if we look closely at ourselves, we will notice something in every description that feels familiar.

Obsessive-compulsive Disorder (OCD), in its pronounced form, affects about one in fifty people. It is worry run amok. The obsession is an intrusive idea that feels impossible to dislodge. The compulsion is the action intended to neutralize the obsession. In its less disruptive form it is fairly common: Most people think about germs and contamination, and it's not unusual to triple-check the alarm and double-check the stove. But it can become life-dominating. The obsession of germs can lead to the compulsion of endless hand-washing that leaves the skin bleeding and sore. The imaginary fear that you might have witnessed or caused an accident keeps you circling back to the side of the road where you think it all happened. You check the scene until the compulsion is dislodged by another. Religious doubts and fears are handled by repetitive counting. Hours of each day are filled with rituals that hopefully will nullify those fears.

One in fifty is the statistic for the more severe form of OCD, but traces of it can be found everywhere. Worries come to us covered in sticky paper; they aren't shaken off easily.

Panic is another common form of fear and anxiety. It is fear that utterly explodes in physical symptoms: heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, shaking, fear of dying, fear of going crazy. After the initial episode, we add the fear that it could happen again, which makes it all the more likely that it will.

There are, of course, treatments for fears and anxieties. Medication dulls the physical symptoms; psychological treatments address the thoughts. If you are afraid to fly because you keep thinking the plane will crash, you can replace that thought with another. *I've flown many times before and nothing has happened. It's the safest way to travel.* This might help, but it rests on the premise that fear submits to logic, which is a dubious assumption. In reality, fears are rarely logical. Or, as fearful people might protest, they are *very*

logical. If the statistics on plane crashes indicate that they are extremely rare, the statistics also say that planes *do* crash and people actually die in plane crashes. *Someone* is going to be that 1 in 100,000; and you aren't feeling very lucky. You have a foreboding sense that the odds are against you.

Other treatments, such as *systematic desensitization*, focus on the body's response to fear. The goal is to teach your body how to relax as a way to distract a mind locked into a potential catastrophe. After you learn to physically relax, you then either imagine or actually face a series of lesser fears while you maintain physical calm. Once you master those, you graduate to the greater fears. You might be encouraged to add a pleasant mental image to your bodily relaxation. Tropical islands are popular. The basic idea is that you can't multi-task. If you are thinking about balmy breezes on a perfect beach, your mind won't have room for your fears.

These versions of fool-your-body-into-thinking-everything-is-okay can help some people cross bridges or even fly; but, when examined closely, they seem superficial and thus rather hopeless. They reduce fear to a series of physiological responses. Meanwhile we suspect that there is a deeper reality to our fears and worries. Listen to your fears and you hear them speak about things that have personal meaning to you. They appear to be attached to things we value.

One of the things we value is life, so it isn't surprising that death hovers right below the surface of many fears. Neither thought control nor physical relaxation can ward off this monster. If we want fear to loosen its grip, we have to deal with death head on. Bridges, planes, and many other fears are the fear of death in disguise. Given such a potent adversary, we can't simply gloss over it with mental trips to Tahiti unless we have already decided that there are no answers and denial is our only hope.

These deeper meanings in our fears suggest that we will have to look in two directions. As we look outward, we will see real dangers: disease, death, war, economic collapse, and a host of other ills. That, however, is only part of the story. Why do we all have different *responses* to possible dangers?

And why are some people petrified of some things, such as mice, that aren't dangerous?

To deeply understand fear we must also look at ourselves and the way we interpret our situations. Those scary objects can reveal what we cherish. They point out our insatiable quest for control, our sense of aloneness. Even the vocabulary of fear indicates that the problem can be deeper than a real, objective danger. While "fear" refers to the experience when a car races toward us and we just barely escape, "anxiety" or worry is the lingering sense, after the car has passed, that life is fragile and we are always vulnerable.

The terrain is fear and anxiety. You are familiar with it, and you are not alone.

YOUR FEAR

I have a new philosophy. I only dread one day at a time.

– CHARLIE BROWN

“NO, I DON’T really have any fears.” He was casual and confident.

Maybe he would reveal his secrets of fearlessness to the rest of us. But you have your doubts. You wonder what would happen if he teetered on the ledge of a tall building or was strapped in the passenger seat while a newly-minted, sixteen-year-old driver, with four boisterous friends in the back, gazed into the rearview mirror to join in the backseat fun and blindly made her way onto the fast lane of the expressway, assuming that other drivers...well, not thinking about other drivers.

Then he explained.

“When I have to fly, I get sweaty palms and usually think about how the plane is too heavy to lift off. When my children are out, I notice all the police and ambulance sirens. I can’t stand thinking about the possibility of my wife dying before me. I worry about money all the time, and how I might die. But, no, I’m not a fearful person.”

His standard must have been hourly panic attacks and full-blown paranoia. He had all the normal fears, maybe more than most. He was just saying that he wasn't quite certifiable. Yet.

Please don't follow his lead. Rather than minimize your fears, find more of them. Expose them to the light of day because the more you find, the more blessed you will be when you hear words of peace and comfort.

BACKGROUND FEAR AND ANXIETY

Start by rounding up the usual suspects.

Fears for your safety and the safety of those you love.

Fears about how you will die: a progressively debilitating disease, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, being alone, being penniless.

Fears about what happens after death: being forgotten, being maligned, being judged, being extinct.

Fears about living a meaningless life. Extensive resumés seem more and more hollow when we consider the end of life.

Fears about being unloved or alone.

Fears about being in love and the high probability of being hurt.

Fears about what you might lose: your figure, boyfriend, girlfriend, hair, youth, mind, money, job, spouse, health, hobbies, purpose, faith.

Any time you love or want something deeply, you will notice fear and anxieties because you might not get them.

Any time you can't control the fate of those things you want or love, you will notice fears and anxieties because you might lose them.

Good insurance policies might help, but they only lessen the risk on things that aren't our real worries. They can't insure that our loved ones will outlive us or keep us from the ravages of age.

Control and certainty are myths.

PHOBIAS

Now take a look at your phobias. Our frailties and eccentricities are plentiful, easy to locate and (when they aren't too extreme) easy to poke fun at. You should be able to come up with twenty or so within a couple of minutes. If you have trouble getting started, ask some friends to prime your pump by naming some of their own specific fears. Once you can name the first ten, you shouldn't have any problem identifying dozens more. For those on the cutting edge of anxiety, *arachibutyrophobia* is a recent one: the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth. Think about it long enough and you could probably wind up claiming it as your own.

Here are some of the more common fears.

Heights	Needles
Paper cuts	Cancer
Suffocation	Terrorism
Mice and other rodents	Insects
Snakes	Baldness
Fat	Germs
Flying	Vomiting
Driving in bad weather	Drowning
The dark	Dentists
Bridges	Crowds

For bonus points, take your top three fears and ask what they say about you. What do you really want? What is important to you? What do you value? What do you love? But that is jumping ahead.

DREAMS

Next, consider your actual dreams and nightmares. Do you have any fear and anxiety dreams?

I was in a house and saw a person being murdered. The murderer was trying to drown someone in the bathtub. When I ran in to try to help, I saw that the person in the bathtub was me.

Just another night's sleep for a healthy college student!

Most of us have anxiety dreams, such as dreams of being pursued, unprepared, overwhelmed, or out of control. The most frequent of my anxiety dreams is one in which I find myself at a podium in front of thousands of people. I am slated to give a speech and my topic is being introduced. As I listen to the title, I hear a string of multi-syllabic words. I assume they are English but I can't be sure. I can't even identify the general category: physics, medicine, astronomy, world peace, fat-free cooking? And if I had the presence of mind to look down, I would probably find that I was naked or dressed in some way that insulted everyone in the audience. I have ten seconds to organize my thoughts.

I can smile about these when I wake up, but they always reveal that I am, indeed, anxious.

What are your dreams saying? The content can be silly and inscrutable, but listen for the emotional tone of your dreams. What do they feel like? Being pursued? Missing deadlines? Spinning endless plates? Being exposed and embarrassed? Keep track of them and in the course of a week you will hear them speak: "I am afraid," "I am anxious," "I'm feeling pressure."

PHYSICAL CLUES

Now notice your body. We can distract ourselves mentally from our anxieties, but our bodies can stay focused on them even when our minds aren't. Our bodies are always scanning our inner emotional terrain. At the first hint of a threat, our bodies are mobilized: palpitations, sweaty palms, perspiration, tension headaches, clenched jaws, impotence, rapid breathing, loss of appetite, increased appetite, problems sleeping, high

blood pressure. Our bodies can tell us we are anxious even before we are aware of it.

Take a quick inventory of your physical tension. Start at the top of your head and go to your toes. Unless you are actually on the tropical beach you once imagined or in a backyard Jacuzzi, you will probably notice that your forehead and neck are tightened. If you relax, your shoulders will drop a good inch or two. Your arms are much more constricted than they need to be in order to hold a book. Try to make yourself a little heavier by letting your muscles relax. A brief physical scan makes you wonder who told your body that the sky is falling.

STRESS

When we are aware that anxiety has registered at a physical level we call it stress. Stress usually means that there is too much to do in too little time, or the things we have to do are beyond our competencies. There is no way we are going to get children off for school on time, meet that deadline at work, or call the plumber about the leak that is starting to come through the ceiling—and that is just the to-do list before lunch. The frenetic pace of life was intended for those with twenty-four-hour secretaries and chauffeurs who double as grocery go-fers. If you listen a little more closely, you will probably detect the theme of control. Stress is saying that life is teetering on the brink, right at the farthest reaches of your ability to maintain some control. What would happen if you really lost control? You don't know, and you don't *want* to know.

Stress can also signify that there is something on your to-do list that will be inspected by others. You feel stress before an important test or before anything done in public, such as athletics, speaking, or performing. Any occasion for evaluation can be stressful. If you listen to this type of stress, it whispers, "Life is risky. Your most treasured dreams rise or fall on your performance." Is failure really that bad? If someone doesn't think you are great,

will life rip apart at the seams? Again, you aren't sure, but you don't have time to consider it. Anxiety and fear prefer to stay on the surface rather than linger to consider something more deeply. And you are too busy anyway. If you think about these things, you will just get farther behind.

BUSY AND DRIVEN

When you have to manage the world, please everyone, earn more than you did last year, and work off five pounds, you will be driven. If not, you run the risk of being un-American or even un-Christian because our economy and churches rely on such people. Even when paralyzed by circumstances, a stressed person is a driven person.

Always busy, never enough time, pushing toward deadlines, fitful sleep, working late, intolerant of interruptions, puts projects over people: You could be talking about the CEO, the middle manager, or the stay-at-home mom who is homeschooling three children. For some, it feels like life is driving them; there is simply so much to do. For others, there is a curious love-hate relationship with their lifestyle. So much of their busyness is self-imposed. Their "yes" to every request suggests that they prefer a driven lifestyle. Or perhaps they value personal achievement and a robust resumé because these might shield them from financial disaster or, worse, the disdain of others.

Maybe the anxiously driven person is running from something. Blaise Pascal was one of the first to suggest that personal character can be assessed by how people handled rest and solitude. Do you avoid quiet? When you are alone, is either the iPod or TV always on? It should make you wonder: *What am I avoiding? What is it about quiet places that is so scary?*

DEPRESSION

Drivenness and depression, on the surface, have little in common. One is active, the other passive. But both can be ways of responding to fear. Listen

carefully to depression and you often hear fear and anxiety: *I am not strong enough to handle the despair any longer. I am afraid all the time. I am losing my ability to hide my true self. I am afraid I'll be exposed. Underneath the emotional pain is terror.*

Depression is rarely sought. It finds you and covers you in darkness. But in the history of literature it is, along with alcohol abuse, romanticized as a kind of poetic muse. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allen Poe, and Robert Lowell are all people who could express tragedy with elegance. But especially in Plath's case, fear was the deeper problem, and there was nothing romantic about it. After her father's death she was terrified of abandonment and responded by running. She threw herself into study, tennis, and writing. "I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to draw back into the womb."

Notice the depressed person who can't get out of bed. Is it possible that he or she doesn't want to face the dangerous world? Outside the covers is a world that is out of control with the potential for failure, rejection, and endless surprises we can't even imagine, so depression opts for paralysis.

Freedom and its pitfalls show up again here. In an authoritarian context you make very few decisions, but with freedom you decide how you will spend your time and money. If you choose to do one thing with your time, you are saying no to something else. You can invest your money in the stock market, open a savings account, put it in a certificate of deposit, or stuff it under the mattress. Each has its risks; none carries a guarantee.

What is more, each choice sets you on a different life trajectory. Choose one IRA over another and you just made a decision that will eventually keep you from a decent house or a high-end retirement home. Decide to work at one company because the benefits are better and embezzlers hijack your retirement account. Will you find a relationship if you keep saying no to coworkers who invite you to a popular bar? Did you allow your son to take the car at the same time a drunk driver was on the road? Should you marry this guy even though you have heard plenty of Jekyll and Hyde stories? It's

enough to make all of us want to stay in bed and yearn for simpler times when we didn't have to make decisions.

ANGER

Many people are familiar with depression. We are all familiar with anger. Anger says, "You are wrong, I am right." But if you listen closely, it can say more.

How do you explain an overly aggressive animal? If it is domesticated or accustomed to sharing its space with humans, you suspect that fear is the problem. Though some run in fear, others attack, defending something important that is at risk. Listen to anger and you will frequently find fear. A woman rages at her husband for coming home late with alcohol on his breath. Sure, there is the "You are wrong" component. But there is also "I am afraid you are losing interest in me. I am afraid you could be tempted by another woman. And when you add alcohol, I get even more afraid."

The problem is compounded with men because men aren't supposed to be afraid. With no permission to discuss fears, men opt for anger. Sometimes their anger says, "This is the only way I know to get some control in an out-of-control world." But it's a stopgap measure. Control that emerges out of anger is strictly temporary.

Scripture says this about anger: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? You want something but don't get it" (James 4:1-2). You want power, love, the TV remote, perfect children, but you don't get them.

Fear and anxiety say this: "You want something, and you might not get it." You want power, love, the TV remote, perfect children, but you might not get them. You want financial security, health for yourself and those you love, safe passage to work, and you know you can't presume any of it.

Fear and anger can be the same words spoken with a different attitude.

OVERPROTECTION

You wouldn't think that protective and involved parents would be driven by fear, but look more closely. Today's parents were an under-protected lot. They grew up during a time when the divorce rate had spiked; they came home to empty houses. Not only were many of them self-parented, they also parented their parents, which means that they had no parents. So naturally, they are protective now as parents, involved and exhausted. They are looking into preschools before their child is born because they sense that the wrong one could forever handicap his or her future. Fear has given birth to extreme parenting. It looks like love, but it is love mingled with fear.

SUPERSTITIONS

Do you have any superstitions? (Assume yes.) When my wife and I visit a particular relative, we can't leave without salt flying, a cryptic comment about cats and ladders, and an incantation or two. And never, ever say *pig*. The neutralizing ritual for such a cosmic *faux pas* would extend your visit an extra day.

Superstitions are personal routines you hope will bring good fortune or avoid bad. "Don't step on the crack or you'll break your mother's back" only morphs with age. It doesn't disappear. World Cup soccer coaches, even of championship teams, won't allow a Scorpio in the locker room for fear that the astrological balance of the team would be forever disrupted. Baseball players wear that one unwashed sock in hopes that it will grant them a big hit. Every major newspaper has its astrology section. Every telephone directory has pages devoted to fortune-tellers and palm readers.

We make light of the idol worshiper, but at least an idol worshiper is appealing to someone personal for good luck. Somehow that makes more sense than trusting in a dirty sock or the gravitational pull of a nearby planet. Superstitions and eccentric habits are a Western substitute for actual idols.

LIFE WITHOUT FEAR?

Could you imagine life without fear? Maybe, but only if you have retained some of that turbo-charged imagination from childhood. What can you imagine? You walk on an airplane and it feels no different from walking into someone's office. Your kids are out late and you still sleep like a baby. Economic indicators predict the worst but you are focused on more important things.

It's not that you want to be without all fear. It's just that some fears are more of a nuisance than others. There are some fears you'd prefer to keep in a less extreme form. For example, you want to be concerned about reckless drivers so that you will wear a seat belt and drive defensively. You prefer to maintain a healthy respect for all animals very large and very small. You just want courage that is not overcome by fear. You don't mind having fear in dangerous situations. It is the nagging background anxieties that you would gladly jettison.

We are in this together, so there is no reason to be shy in acknowledging our multitude of fears and worries. W. H. Auden wrote a poem about our era entitled, "The Age of Anxiety." Albert Camus spoke about the "century of fear." But every age is an age of anxiety, every century a century of fear.

CHAPTER THREE

FEAR SPEAKS

THERE IS NO DAWDLING in the face of fear. When we perceive it creeping up on us we want to keep moving. To slow down and listen to what it might be saying is counterintuitive.

But fear is speaking, and we should listen.

One useful life skill is to know when to listen to our feelings and when to ignore them. As a general rule, the first step is to listen. There is a logic—a language—to fear and anxiety, just as there is to most emotions. Anger says, "You are wrong." Embarrassment or shame says, "I am wrong." Fear says, "I am in danger," but it also says much more.

Don't forget, listening for fear is like listening to background noise. At first you think there is nothing to hear, but then you notice the wind in the trees, birds calling for a mate, cars passing by, a plane overhead, creaks in the floors, the water heater kicking in. At first we might deny any palpable fears and their logic, but then we listen more carefully and notice that they are everywhere, speaking loudly.

Eventually we can start to detect some general themes.