

STEP 1: FEAR

Fear is a common reaction to many situations in life as well as in sports. How do we respond? The Bible gives us some great ways to address our fears.

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO PLAY HOCKEY
TONIGHT?

My head was throbbing, my nose was stuffy, my joints were aching, my throat was parched. I had one nasty cold.

And I had agreed to play ice hockey with my buddies that evening.

So did I consider *not* playing? Not a chance! I am a goalie. If a goalie doesn't show up, there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. Grown men cry. I didn't want to be the cause of such emotional distress.

I had lunch that day with a priest friend of mine. Seeing my condition, he asked, “Are you sure you want to play hockey today?” I said, “Yes,” adding to myself, “With all my heart.” We would be playing outdoors, and this was a rare treat that I didn’t want to miss. Most of our games were in indoor arenas. Skating outdoors was like returning to the ice age: the cold wind blowing on your face, the puck coming out of the dark sky. The year before we had played outdoors in a driving blizzard—with stickhandling through the snow, my winding up for a slap shot, the puck coming at me out of nowhere in the drifts, and adrenaline rushing through my veins. For hockey players, it doesn’t get any better than that.

Did I want to play? Yeah, you bet I did! I wasn’t about to let a little distraction like a cold hold me back.

So I went to the rink. I suited up: pads, gloves, skates, helmet, stick. I took the ice.

I was afraid.

Not that I might be too sick to play. I was afraid that I would make a fool of myself. I was afraid that my nickname, the “Holy Goalie,” might be misunderstood to mean that shooters were finding too many holes in my game. I was afraid that some of the guys would mistake my sickness for my being too old and washed up. I was afraid I might hear the ultimate taunt, “Get off the ice!”

So, as I took the ice, I said a prayer: “Lord, I’ve got nothing today. Please help me. I’m in your hands.”

At long last, the game started. The rush came at me. The puck came across the slot and I slid across the goalie crease. As the pass connected with the streaking center, his shot came point blank, hit me in the shoulder, and bounced out of harm’s way. “Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Mary. Thank you, Joseph. Thank you, my Guardian Angel.” The first save is always big. At least they wouldn’t be chasing me off the ice after just one shot.



On the next rush, the left winger skated behind the net. He tried to pass to his center in the slot in front of my net. I got my stick out and blocked his pass, but in doing so I sprawled out on the ice. The puck bounced back to the center in front of me. This time he lobbed a pass over my prone body that connected with one of his teammates who bagged it into the net before I could get back up. Oh well, we were down 1–0.

The next shot at me was targeted for the “five hole,” between my legs. I just barely got down in time to stop it under my leg pads. “Thank you, Jesus.” On the next shot, however, I wasn’t as lucky. Now, we were down 2–0.

“Uh-oh. This could be a long night. Thy will be done.”

Then, unexpectedly, the tide turned. I made a glove save on one shot. On another, I slid across the crease and trapped the puck in my midsection without giving up a rebound. Then, something wonderful happened. My team scored. Not once, but again. And again. Then another. And one more time for good measure. We ended up winning the game 5–2. Just before the clock ran out, my friend Wally skated in on me on a break-away. I dropped to my knees and blocked his shot with my pads. “Nice save, Padre,” said Wally, as he skated past. I stayed on my knees. “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”

FEAR: THE GREAT MOTIVATOR

In athletics, sometimes fear can be a great motivator. Fear and playing goalie seem to go hand in hand. Two of my childhood heroes are Chicago Blackhawks goalies Glenn Hall and Tony Esposito, who are both members of the National Hockey League Hall of Fame. Yet both were infamous for their pregame fears. Glenn Hall holds the NHL record for consecutive games played: 502. Legend has it that he used to “toss his cookies” before most games. If he didn’t, he knew his mind wasn’t

focused properly. Tony Esposito holds the NHL record for most shutouts in a season: fifteen. His wife says that Tony wouldn't talk to her on game days. He wasn't giving her the silent treatment; he was just mentally focused on the task at hand.

Many people would assume that what frightens goalies is standing in front of a hockey net and having frozen pucks made of hard, vulcanized rubber being shot at them at speeds of 100 miles per hour. Both Glenn Hall and Tony Esposito said that's not what scared them. Most goalies would agree, and so do I. Over the years, I've had my share of injuries: cracked cartilage in my knee requiring surgery and hospitalization for a week (in the old days before outpatient arthroscopic surgery); broken fingers on my catching hand; stitches and scars on my face from pucks hitting my mask; and more black-and-blue marks and bruises on my arms, chest, and thighs than I could ever count or remember. None of that scares me or prevents me from getting back in the nets as soon as possible.

So what scares the daylights out of a goalie?

That's simple: giving up goals. Bad goals. Soft goals. Any goals. And, not only that, but especially the embarrassment that goes along with it.

Goaltending is the only position in all of sports where your failure is brought to everyone's attention with the flashing of a red light, the referee blowing his

whistle and pointing at the puck in the net behind you, your opponents raising their sticks, their fans on their feet cheering, and your own fans moaning and booing.

So why do we goalies do it?

Despite the danger of being the goat, we can't resist the opportunity to rise up to the challenge. We get to be at the center of the action. We're the last line of defense. We're everyone's last hope. We're the one everyone's relying on. And that challenge is absolutely thrilling. Fear is just one part of the bigger reality we call goaltending.

HOW DO WE FACE OUR FEARS?

After winning the gold medal in 1998 as goaltender for the US Women's Hockey team at the Olympics in Nagano, Japan, Sarah Tueting pretty much walked away from the sport. She didn't even put on skates for another nine months. The lure of chasing after the challenge, however, would not let go, and when training camp opened for the 2002 Olympics, Sarah was right back in the mix, vying for the starting position. It was then that she says she faced her greatest fear: "I was scared I wouldn't make it again."

However, Sarah changed her way of thinking. "There is a risk involved in putting my life on hold, but that is not a good reason not to play," she said. "God forbid I don't make it, but I've quit hockey before and

come back pretty confident in other areas of my life, so it wouldn't be that devastating." With this new way of thinking, Sarah was able to face her fears. She went on to make the team, earning a silver medal at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

Of course, playing goalie isn't the only thing that instills fear in one's heart. Fear is a common reaction to many experiences in life. I remember being afraid on the first day of school in kindergarten, which I considered to be a strange place with people I didn't know. When my mother dropped me off, I cried and didn't stop crying until she promised me a bubble-gum cigar when I got home if I would be quiet. It worked.

As time moves on and we mature, we tend to overcome certain fears. However, many fears still remain:

- Many of us are terrified of public speaking.
- We might be anxious about meeting new people or starting a new job.
- We fear taking tests.
- We can be afraid of going to the dentist.
- We fear encountering conflict.
- We await the results of a medical exam with trepidation.
- We break out in a cold sweat and our hearts race when we have to deliver some bad news or confront a person's wrongdoing or mistake.

WAYS TO FACE OUR FEARS

So, how do we face our fears? One reaction is flight. It's human nature to avoid situations that make us afraid. However, fleeing from our fears need not be the only option. Facing up to our fears helps us to grow, strengthening emotional and spiritual muscles that we will call upon in the future.

What we need are ways to deal with common, everyday fears if we don't want to become paralyzed by them. I found some excellent advice about dealing with fear as I was preparing for one of the many marathons I've run over the years. An article in *Runner's World* magazine described the fears that runners often face and how to overcome them. I think that the logic suggested here for dealing with fears in the world of running can be applied to many situations, in sports and life in general:

Example 1

Fear: "I want to enter a race, but I'm afraid I'll be last."

Solution: Most community events attract recreational walkers, so sorry, the last-place position is already taken. Ask your runner friends or the staff at local running stores about which races are most fun for

a beginner—meaning they attract runners of all abilities and have a supportive cheering section.

Example 2

Fear: “When I race, everyone seems faster than me.”

Solution: There will always be runners that are faster than you. As long as you can finish within the allotted time, run and walk however you want.

Example 3

Fear: “I’m worried I’ll hurt myself if I go faster.”

Solution: If you gradually increase your speed and distance, and incorporate sufficient walk breaks and rest days, there’s little chance you’ll suffer an injury.

Fears like these race as sort of a narrative through our minds. However, if we stop to think about them rationally, we can find ways of overcoming these fears. The fact is, many of our fears are based on faulty thinking. The solution, obviously, is to use our God-given brains to replace faulty thinking (referred to as “stinking thinking” in 12 Step programs) with healthy thinking. When Jesus preached the kingdom of God, it was really a call to conversion. And conversion is

nothing other than a change of mind and heart—a new way of thinking. Faith and hope enable us to consider new possibilities and a new reality—a reality that is transformed.

I remember as a boy learning that three of my grandparents died in their fifties before I was born. I knew enough to realize that this was not a good gene pool. I began to fear that the same fate awaited me. This feeling of fear could have consumed me. I could have remained in fear all of my life, dreading the day when my heart would give out just as my grandparents' hearts did.

Instead, I changed my thinking. I read some articles and books about the emerging science of aerobic training and the cardiovascular benefits of rigorous endurance exercise like running. Armed with this new thinking, I started running. It was as simple as that. I had never run track or cross country in high school. My new way of thinking, grounded in hope and faith, was in essence a way of reshuffling the deck and playing with a new hand other than the one dealt to me at birth. I chose not to live in fear but instead embraced God's invitation to trust. With God's grace, today my weight is the same now as it was when I graduated high school, my blood pressure is low, my heart rate is efficient, my cholesterol is great, and I've outlived those three grandparents!

LETTING GO OF ALL THAT WE FEAR TO LOSE

Fear also plays a prominent role in many great Hollywood movies. One of my favorites is the *Star Wars* epic, which I once had the opportunity to watch in its entirety and in chronological sequence while on vacation. What becomes apparent in watching them in order from episodes one to six is how the clear thread of fear connects with the issues of redemption and trust from start to finish.

Anakin Skywalker, who appears in *Star Wars I* as a young boy with the promise of becoming the “chosen one” whom the Jedi Knights awaited, is ultimately unable to trust the power of “the Force” and instead goes over to the “Dark Side” to become the notorious Darth Vader in service of the evil empire. His own fears render him incapable of trusting and compel him to instill fear in others through his malicious cruelty. Despite his wretched and evil perversity, his son, Luke Skywalker, never gives up on his father. In *Star Wars VI*, Luke says repeatedly about his father, “I see some good in him.” Luke’s faith in his father is ultimately vindicated when Anakin Skywalker renounces his Darth Vader persona and saves his son’s life and his own soul by killing the evil emperor—hence, redemption.

In between the innocent beginning and the happy ending of this saga is the ongoing struggle between good and evil—trust and fear—characterized by the

Jedi Knights who confront evil by use of the Force. Many of the wisest lessons in regard to working with the Force are taught by the elderly and diminutive Jedi Master, Yoda. At the beginning of Anakin Skywalker's training as a Jedi Knight, Yoda says to him at the Jedi Council, "Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you."

Before Anakin Skywalker goes over the Dark Side, Yoda tells him, "Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed that is. Train yourself to let go of all that you fear to lose."

Yoda is describing what many great Catholic mystics would call "detachment." Through detachment, we learn to let go of all that we fear to lose, whether that is power, riches, glory, winning, success, good health, or even life on earth. In place of all these, we are called to put our hope and our trust in God. Fear is indeed the path to darkness—the inability to see clearly. Jesus, the Light of the World, dispels all darkness and thus removes the fear that can lead us to anger, hate, and suffering. Christian rock singer Stephen Curtis Chapman accurately expresses the attitude that Christians rely on when faced with fear in his composition *Hold on to Jesus*: