

A  
*Woman's*  
Path *to*  
Emotional  
*Freedom*

Julie Clinton



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## **A WOMAN'S PATH TO EMOTIONAL FREEDOM**

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## Anxious and Afraid

Many of us crucify ourselves between two thieves—  
regret for the past and fear of the future.

FULTON OURSLER

Jim was out of town. Zach was with a friend. It was the perfect weekend for Megan and me to begin spring cleaning.

After a few hours of dusting, sweeping, and washing the windows, we decided to go shopping for hanging baskets and planters to put on the porch and by our pool. Trying to figure out what flowers, plants, and colors would look best, we visited a variety of places. Before long, as often seems to happen, we were back at the very first landscaping company we had visited. The beautiful planters and hanging baskets there were in full bloom and lined up in neat rows on piles of wood chips. We carefully chose the nicest ones we could find and paid the clerk, who loaded them in our car.

Little did we know what else we had in the car as we headed home.

I pulled through our circular driveway and parked near the front door to our house. Megan and I jumped out and began unloading the planters and sitting them right inside the door.

“Mom,” said Megan, “I think that’s all of them. Do you want me to take the hanging baskets down by the pool?”

“Yes, if you would please, that would be great,” I said as I finished unloading the other items we had bought on our trip. As I was

closing the hatch, I heard one of the most bloodcurdling screams I've ever heard.

"Aaahhh!" screamed Megan, "There's a snake in the house!"

I immediately ran up the front steps, and sure enough, in the corner of the room was a snake.

Picture Megan and me standing in the house, looking a snake square in the face and wondering what to do. It must have been in one of the planters, which means it was with us in the car and one of us carried it into our house!

You think snakes are bad? You should see Tim when he comes across a spider. It's a scene that would put any *Saturday Night Live* skit to shame. To see him dance around the living room is priceless.

As a counselor, though, he understands fear well. One time he was standing under a tree and a snake actually fell on him! To this day he insists that every time he sees a snake he can feel it wrapping around his neck. It's a good thing he was out of town the day the snake came home with Megan and me.

Fear of spiders or snakes is common, but Tim says that people aren't sure whether those fears are innate. Some psychologists suggest that we are born with five fears; others say we are born with two. People are most commonly afraid of these five things:

death

embarrassment

love lost

rejection

heights (falling)

A recent Gallup poll asked teenagers ages 13 to 15 what their greatest fear was. Here are the top ten responses, starting with the most common:

terrorist attacks

spiders

death  
failure  
war  
heights  
criminal or gang violence  
being alone  
the future  
nuclear war<sup>1</sup>

Are you afraid of any of these? I know I am—especially now that we know we’re no longer impervious to things like terrorist attacks and violence. While I was writing this book, John Allen Muhammad, most commonly known as the DC sniper, was executed in Virginia seven years after he and his accomplice, Lee Boyd Malvo, murdered ten people around that area. His execution reawakened many DC area residents’ fears and prompted them to once again reevaluate their daily routines to avoid becoming the next victim.<sup>2</sup>

Fear is the natural response to a real or perceived threat of imminent danger, evil, or pain. It’s always a response to something in the future, something that is going to happen or that we think is going to happen. Take a moment and consider this: What are some of your own greatest fears? How do you react when you face something that you are afraid of?

### **Fear in Relationships**

Two sisters showcase the different ways fear can control people’s lives. They were just a few years apart, they grew up together, and they were now in their thirties. That’s where the similarities end. When I met Suzanne, I was immediately impressed by her sunny disposition. She always had a kind word for those who crossed her path each day. The first time I saw her encounter a difficulty, I noticed that she instantly stated her steadfast trust in God. As time

went on and others around her faced various kinds of heartache, she unflinchingly wore a smile and spoke words of faith.

I appreciate people who trust God through thick and thin, but Suzanne was different. She seemed incapable of realistically facing the hard facts of life. When I heard about Suzanne's child's debilitating, life-threatening sickness, I expressed sadness and hugged her, but Suzanne again reported cheerily, "Oh, don't worry. God is in control, and we can trust him." I suspected that Suzanne's superficial spirituality was covering up something very painful, but I had no idea what it was.

Then I met her sister. Brittany certainly looked like Suzanne—similar facial features, hair texture and color, and other physical attributes—but her demeanor and Suzanne's were as opposite as day and night. Brittany was tough, hard-nosed, willing to "call it like she saw it," never sugarcoating any painful event or awkward relationship. She was in control of every moment of her life, demanding agreement and instant compliance from those who reported to her.

For a few days I was with both women, and I was amazed at the contrast in their outlook, attitude, and behavior. They were raised in the same home, but they seemed to be from two different planets! I hadn't gotten very far in trying to break through Suzanne's protective shell, so I took a chance to talk to Brittany. Completely in character, she told the unvarnished truth.

"Our family was really screwed up," she said without a hint of self-consciousness or self-pity. "Dad was a drunk, and he beat Mom, Suzanne, and me when he came home after his binges. He always apologized later, but the damage was done."

I asked, "How do you think his abuse affected you?"

Brittany glared at me with steely resolution. "I decided no one would ever hurt me again—*never*." And she meant it. As it turns out, Brittany's and Suzanne's relationships are poisoned with the fear that someone is going to hurt them.

Fear is likely the most common human emotion. I'd like to say it's love, joy, or peace, but I don't think that's the case. In fact, fear is so common that we don't even recognize it. We're like fish who don't realize we're wet. Our responses to fear vary: Some of us are paralyzed, and others of us are compelled to control our surroundings. But all of us experience fear to some degree, and unless we respond to it honestly and courageously, it will probably shape our lives in unhealthy ways.

What are women afraid of? Almost anything. One of the biggies is rejection. We long to be connected, to feel loved and safe, and we're afraid that the people we value won't treasure us. We may be afraid of failure—at work, at church, at home, or in bed—hoping we can succeed enough to meet someone's standard and become acceptable. We may be afraid of being penniless, so we hoard our money. Or conversely, we may be afraid of being excluded from a certain group unless we keep up appearances, so we spend too much money on clothes, cars, and the spa.

Fears create their own treadmills because acceptance and success are so fleeting. Even when we get the approval and acclaim we long for, the good feelings don't last long. Then we realize we have to do even more to stay in the spotlight, and we feel even more driven to perform.

We naturally assess the risks in any venture or personal encounter, and we determine whether the potential gain is worth the gamble. Many women feel caught in the no-man's-land between hope and fear, especially in relationships with men. Canadian journalist and author Merle Shain observed, "Loving can cost a lot, but not loving always costs more, and those who fear to love often find that want of love is an emptiness that robs the joy from life."<sup>3</sup> When we shrink back in fear, we think we're protecting ourselves from harm, but often we are actually preventing ourselves from experiencing real life. Certainly, we don't want to take foolish risks and trust untrustworthy people, but we can learn to trust wisely and cautiously.



## Alone at the Well

In the first century AD, most Jews who traveled from Judea to Galilee took a circuitous route around Samaria. Jews detested Samaritans because they were half-breeds, religious apostates, and former political enemies. Good Jews wouldn't even talk to Samaritans, much less develop relationships with them. But of course, Jesus was not like most first-century Jews. I'm sure Jesus' disciples were perplexed when he chose to lead them straight through Samaria.

At noon near the town of Sychar, Jesus sat by a well while his disciples went into town to buy food. As Jesus waited for them to return, a woman came to draw water from the well. All the other women from the city had come early in the morning at the customary time, but she came at noon. Why? Was she trying to avoid them?

She was an adulteress, an outcast among outcasts. She probably avoided other women because she was tired of their sneers and cat-calls. Did her fear determine her daily schedule and keep her isolated? Probably, but Jesus saw beneath her fear and spoke to her heart.

From his clothing, she would have recognized he was a Jew and assumed he was prejudiced against her. When Jesus opened the dialogue by asking her to give him a drink of water, she was undoubtedly shocked. As the conversation progressed, Jesus spoke truthfully but graciously. He drew her relational secrets out of the shadows and into the light, but instead of condemning her, his demeanor and initiative assured her of his love and forgiveness. When he revealed that he was the Messiah, the one she had been looking for, her fears melted in his love, and she believed. She was so excited about this seemingly chance and amazingly freeing encounter with the Messiah that she ran into town to tell everyone she knew—even those who had rejected her—about the forgiveness and love she had found.

When the disciples came back and saw what was happening, they were likely shaking their heads and thinking, *Now what's he doing? We go to town for a cheeseburger, and he skips lunch to hang out with her!* The apostle John later wrote, "There is no fear in love.

But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18). She had lived her life under a cloud of fear—fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, fear of ridicule—but Jesus’ love pierced all of her heart’s defenses and doubts. She became a new woman.

I am not afraid of tomorrow, for I have  
seen yesterday and I love today.

WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

Just for fun, here are a few uncommon fears.

anthrophobia: fear of flowers

arithmophobia: fear of numbers

bibliophobia: fear of books

clinophobia: fear of beds

paedophobia: fear of children

hypnophobia: fear of sleep and falling asleep

lyssophobia: fear of insanity

phobatrivaphobia: fear of trivia about phobias

dromophobia: fear of crossing the road

unatractiphobia: fear of ugly people

arachibutyrophobia: fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof  
of the mouth

cathisophobia: fear of sitting

hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia: fear of long words

scolionophobia: fear of school

urophobia: fear of urine or urinating

xenoglossophobia: fear of foreign languages

## Fresh Insights

A few weeks ago I was driving along Route 501, a four-lane highway that I take often on my way home. Minding my own business and cruising along at the speed limit, I came up on another car moving fairly slowly, but I was afraid to pass it. The car was weaving back and forth from lane to lane, sometimes just straddling the centerline. I didn't know whether the driver was drunk, asleep, or just not paying attention. After I had followed the car for about a mile, I finally mustered up the courage to go around it. As I did, I saw the driver—a college-age girl texting on her cell phone. Just another reason to be afraid of driving.

Some fears are clearly helpful! Speeding along a crowded highway next to a driver who is texting on her phone produces a legitimate fear and calls for an intelligent response, like quickly passing her, or slowing down and following her, or maybe throwing a purse at her! (We will deal with that later.) When people in California feel the earth move, they experience very normal and reasonable fear for their safety. Healthy fears of danger keep us alert and responsive. We do well to pay attention to them and act accordingly—unless they grow inordinately and consume our lives.

But what about the devastating, consuming fears, the ones that make us feel out of control because they have taken over our lives? They threaten our stability and security, so we lash out in anger or cower in terror. We scramble to establish some sense of stability and carve out some measure of meaning in our lives. Our fears make us feel terribly vulnerable, so we attack at the slightest provocation, or we hide from even the faintest hint of trouble. We build high, thick walls to protect our hearts, but those walls prevent us from getting close to anyone. We lie in order to make ourselves look a little better than others or to make them look a little worse than us. Sooner or later, we may have told so many lies that we don't even remember what's true anymore.

When fears control our lives, we feel like victims, and soon, we

can't see ourselves in any other way. We believe we've been wronged by people and by God, and we demand that somebody make us feel better. Self-pity eventually leads to passivity. Instead of taking action to change the situation, we wait for someone to do it for us—but they seldom do. We become fragile and demanding, easily hurt but expecting others to jump through our hoops. When they don't, we're hurt yet again, and the cycle continues.

Those whose lives are shaped by fear engage in black-and-white thinking. They don't feel safe and secure enough to see shades of gray and make hard choices, so they automatically try to simplify their world by seeing people as either all good or all bad. They are either all the way in relationships or all the way out of them. Oftentimes this is because the people they were supposed to love or trust were the very people who hurt them, making relationships a bewildering mix of joy and pain.

I remember meeting with a woman who swore up and down that her husband was cheating on her. They tremendously enjoyed their times together when he was home, but whenever he left town on business, she called his cell phone every 30 minutes to be sure he was where he said he would be. If he didn't answer or call her back, she called his hotel. Every time he returned home, she gave him the silent treatment until he apologized for not picking up his phone. Once he had been home long enough for her to feel safe again, they were back to loving each other like newlyweds. But her fear that he was cheating paralyzed her and stifled their marriage. As a result, her worst fears eventually came to pass—not because he cheated, but because she was out of control. He'd had it.

Extreme fears become diagnosable phobias and consume people's lives, robbing them of joy and freedom. Fear is a central component in obsessive-compulsive behavior, panic attacks, and other types of fear-related disorders in which people feel compelled to control themselves or their environment in an attempt to feel safe.

Some relationships or situations are truly threatening. In these

situations, fear is completely reasonable, and we need to take steps to protect ourselves. If we find ourselves in relationships like these, rational fear should drive us to take action: to speak truth, set boundaries, avoid trusting untrustworthy people, and offer steps forward toward a healthier relationship based on trust and respect. If the person agrees, the relationship can be restored. It is foolish, though, to trust people who have proven to be untrustworthy. Overcoming our fears doesn't make us vulnerable to abusive people; rather, it empowers us to muster our courage and take steps of faith to protect ourselves and offer a path of reconciliation.

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every  
experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.  
You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

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### Steps Forward

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If you want to change a situation, the first step is to accurately assess it. Many women remain mired in fear because they don't even realize they are afraid. When one lady studied this subject and reflected on her life, she told me sadly, "Julie, I've never realized until today that my entire life has been under a cloud of fear. Everything I've done, everything I've said, and every relationship I've had has been shaped by my fear of being alone. What in the world can I do about it?" She had already taken the first step toward hope and healing.

God is well aware of how fragile we are and how fear can consume our hearts and paralyze us. Many women I know are afraid of failure. Others fear rejection. I don't believe it's a coincidence that the command "Do not fear" is found 365 times in the Bible. We need to hear it every day. Don't be surprised when the Holy Spirit taps you on the shoulder and whispers, *You're acting out of fear. Remember I'm with you and be courageous.*

We may think that fear and faith are completely separate and never occupy the same space in our hearts, but that's not true. Faith isn't the absence of fear, but the choice to depend on God's truth and power even when we're afraid. I can sense the comfort and courage the psalmist must have felt when he wrote, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you" (Psalm 56:3). He didn't write that he would trust God after his fears were gone or when he wasn't afraid at all. No, in the middle of his fear, he chose to trust in God's goodness, strength, and wisdom.

Fears that are deeply rooted in a painful past don't magically disappear. They gradually took up residence in our lives, and God's grace can gradually dissolve them. This process includes other people, for just as we are wounded in relationships, we experience healing and hope in relationships. Find a trusted friend to talk with—someone who doesn't have instant answers for long-term problems, someone who understands and has compassion for you, someone who points you back to Christ's perfect love, which casts out our inordinate fears. That's the key: Experience God's love and strength more deeply every day, and let his goodness and greatness fill your heart and replace your fears.

Your trusted friend will help you face your fears and develop new skills to handle life. Instead of shrinking back in hopeless passivity, you'll learn to speak up, chart a new course, and take action toward your goals. You won't demand compliance from people because love will replace your fear, and you'll be able to truly care for people instead of controlling them.

Many women keep acting and feeling the same way day after day and year after year because they simply don't believe there's any other way to live. I'm here to tell you there *is* another way to live! We have a choice! We don't have to be driven by our fears. We can admit they exist, talk to wise friends who help us process our buried pain, change our perceptions of reality, and take bold steps to get our lives back. When we do, the whole world opens up to us.

When you are honest with yourself, do you see any areas of your life that show the effects of inordinate, controlling fear? Do you have a friend or family member who needs someone like you to help her take steps toward melting those fears in the love of God? Take a moment to consider whether today could be the day that you begin to face your fears in a new way.

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### Healing the Damage

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1. What are some of the most common fears women experience?
2. How do these fears control their lives, make them feel fragile, and compel them to protect themselves?
3. What are some completely helpful fears? When do they become unhelpful?
4. Read John 4:1-42. How did the Samaritan woman demonstrate her fears? How did Jesus speak to her heart? How did she respond?
5. How do fears often lead to self-pity and passivity?
6. Do any inordinate fears control your life? Explain your answer.
7. If they do, who is a trusted friend you can talk to?

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### Bible Passages on Fear

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“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

“Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

“The LORD is my light and my salvation  
whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold of my life  
of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1).

“The LORD is for me; I will not be afraid.  
What can man do to me?” (Psalm 118:6).

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but  
of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7 NLT).

“But the love of the LORD remains forever  
with those who fear him.  
His salvation extends to the children’s children”  
(Psalm 103:17 NLT).

“All you who fear the LORD, trust the LORD!  
He is your helper and your shield”  
(Psalm 115:11 NLT).

“Praise the LORD.  
Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,  
who finds great delight in his commands”  
(Psalm 112:1).

“Though a mighty army surrounds me,  
my heart will not be afraid.  
Even if I am attacked,  
I will remain confident” (Psalm 27:3 NLT).