

LEARNING TO THROW

In August 2001, we went to Minsk, Belarus to attend my daughter, Jessica's wedding. Belarus has not changed much since the Soviet era. It is basically a closed country, not really even a developing country, run by a brutal dictator, and xenophobia is ubiquitous.

When we landed safely at the Minsk airport, everybody on board applauded and cheered. I didn't think that was a good omen.

The airport was not designed for tourists. It was made of concrete blocks, unpainted, and smelled like a bad lagoon.

The demeanor of the military guards who thoroughly scrutinized everyone nicely complimented the ambiance of the terminal.

Finally, we were allowed through customs, and we warmly greeted by Jessica and my soon to be son-in-law Dima.

Dima handed someone a US \$20 bill, and we were able to get the next taxi that drove us through us to the city centre, where an apartment had been rented for us, for the week. Nearly everyone lives in apartment buildings. And, strangely, for a city with virtually no crime because of the constant, abundant presence of the militia police, everyone is paranoid about crime. The apartment, similar to all others, had two metal doors, and each door had three locks on it.

I shuttered to think what would happen if there was ever a fire.

We dropped our luggage off, went out to get something to eat, and they took us back to our temporary home.

Jessica and Dima warned us that since the water was contaminated we must use bottled water, and to sterilize our hands after touching the tap water.

Most everything else in the place was different from what we were used to.

Since it was getting late, they said to be sure to bolt all the locks after they left, that they'd return in the morning... and then.... they were gone.

And,... there we were.

I think I know how the apostles felt when Jesus ascended / went away.

They were numb, and I bet feeling very anxious because they faced the unknown without him.

I was feeling very anxious when Jessica and Dima left, and "What ifs" played in my head like a broken record.

They didn't leave a phone number? What if something happens? What if something happens to them?

Is my Russian good enough? Who / how do I call for help?

Throughout the night, I was tormented with "What if this.... What if that.... happens?"

Anxiety.

We all know what anxiety is. We have all felt it at some point, at some degree. Some of you are feeling it right now, wondering, “Will this sermon go on past 11, and what if I nod off for a moment?”
Actually, those feelings are fear and not anxiety.

Anxiety is a mood condition. Whereas, fear is an emotional response to a perceived threat. Anxiety thrives in and from the unknown. Anxiety can create feelings of fear, worry, uneasiness and dread.

Anxiety consumes people differently. It may be rare or manageable for some people, while others are debilitated by it.

A lot of people become anxious for no identifiable reason, and the root cause may come from stress, trauma or simply from brain chemistry.

Without a rationale, anxiety can be overwhelming and incapacitating, causing each day to be a struggle.

Fortunately, there are medications that adjust the brain’s chemistry, and they help... to a point.

Still, the overriding essence of anxiety is the grappling with the unknown from the perspective of being unprepared, unqualified and unable to deal with what “surprise” is about to happen,..... and that surprise lurking in the unknown is always the worse case scenario.

It is the dread of being defeated by the unknown “What’s next” / What if.”

Anxiety rises when we face new situations, such as a new job, graduating from school, retiring, relocating or.... being left in a fearful, unfamiliar place.

And, being told, “Don’t worry” or “everything is going to be fine” really does NOT ease anxiety, and can even enhance the anxiousness... because those comments are imbedded with the message, “What’s wrong with you?” and “Why are you so weak?”

Berating is bad medicine.

However, three things can reduce anxiety, and the three things are interrelated / interconnected.

The three aids are information, experience and real assistance / help.

They are interconnected in the following ways:

From experience we learn to trust the help and the information.

Information can point us to see more clearly, to recognize who can help and how to gain experience.

The assuaging help / help that reduces the burden can be found with new insight and from past experiences.

When facing the horror of the unknown, acquiring more information / details is good. Information can chip away at the unknown.

Before Jesus left, he told the apostles many things, including a coming source of help for challenges to come – the Holy Spirit, AND... two men dressed in white, suddenly appeared, after Jesus left, and gave more information.

They explained what had happened, repeated that Jesus would return, and told them to quit standing around looking up at the sky.

The apostles were frozen, and the message from the two men apparently made sense to them to stop staring at the sky, because they soon returned home.

Experience is another big reducer for anxiety.

If we've survived an unnerving situation dealing with the unknown before, then future unknowns can be a little less daunting.

Psychologist, John Bradshaw suggested that as toddlers we should feel safety in adventure and discovery, and if we didn't, then "Adult anxiety will reveal itself.

If that's the case, Bradshaw recommends that we rediscover "Safety" in exploration, and learn through dealing with small experiences, that the unknown is not so dangerous or bad.

In order to do that, it helps to reduce challenges / the unknown to a smaller scale – to just one day or even the next five minutes.

An unknown ordeal may seem huge, yet we may be able to get through the next 5 minutes,.... and then the next,... and so on.

The I Peter passage was written in the context of Christians being persecuted; the stress, trauma and the unknown was really getting to them. The preceding verses provided information / reminders that they have already been through a lot, and encouraged them to just hold on a little longer,... just a little longer.

Oh,..... I said there were three things that can reduce anxiety: information, experience and outside help, maybe I should have said four. ??? Well,.... it isn't really another tool, but rather a key ingredient, and it is "Discipline" / self-discipline.

Self-discipline is not a popular concept. It's like a vegetable to a kid.

The value is understood, but it just.... doesn't taste like candy.

Self-discipline can be a real struggle,..... and disciplining self is hard to do if we don't value ourselves / if our self esteem is low.

In other words, engaging in self-discipline does NOT mean we are gifted with great will power. NOT AT ALL.

It means that we know that we are worth investing our time and energy in ourselves.....because we know we have value and we are loved.

When we sense our value / that we are worth our own investment, then the following will happen:

1 - it will change our negative thinking and negative self regard.

2. We'll accept responsibility, and STOP living to "avoid pain".

(Living to avoid pain can cause anxiety.)

3. We'll become more dedicated to reality, instead of dwelling in the "what ifs". We focus on the present and what is real... because we are worth living in the now. [as per Scott Peck]

Self-discipline is a statement of "I'm worth it"..... and the more we self-invest, the more confidence we will have... to simply "BE" / to be present in the "now".

Yet, we need to sense / to know that we are loved and that we are worthy of love, and that requires that we let our guard down / that we trust.

Our First Peter text begins by saying, "Humble yourselves to God... so that by God's love and grace, God will lift you / us up.

In order to appreciate the Psalmist message in Psalm 68 that God is benevolent, all powerful, loving and gracious, we need to let our guard down / we need to humble ourselves.... by letting go of the need to control things.

The need to control comes from Fear, distrust and insecurity... the result of not feeling loved / of not knowing grace.

Peter continues by encouraging us to "Cast" / throw all our anxiety on God. To release our anxiety to God,..... because why and how?

Because God cares for us, God loves us. And, one who receives our anxiety is an example of "real help" – someone who will help carry the burden / who will walk with us / who will be there into the unknown with us is help we need.

That devotion and love is real, genuine help.

The next verse reminds us to be alert,... or in other words... be informed / to get that needed information.

And, verse 8 also has that difficult concept: "Self-discipline."

Self-discipline is the antithesis of laziness, and I believe laziness is Not from God. Laziness comes like a roaming lion, ready to devour those who feel worthless and unlovable.

*We are loved by God, and to think we are unlovable comes from another source.

So,.....back to self-discipline and the title of this sermon.

When I was 14 years old, my church had a pretty good boy's softball team.

The next year, we knew we were really, really good, and I was the pitcher. Being pitcher was not that big of deal. I was merely able to get the ball closer to the plate than anyone else on the team, and it was softball. People like to hit the ball if its close enough.

After a few easy games, we played "Salem". They looked like a push over. The entire team was young and small—no problem. We'd dispense them in short order. However, their coach used their weakness to their advantage. He told all his players to crouch down while at bat, making the strike zone even smaller. I forgot how many I walked. I do know we Lost. Suddenly, I felt like everyone was looking at me, and strangely, at the same time, I felt all alone.

The next game was also against an inferior team we could easily beat, yet I was filled with anxiety, wondering, "what if... they crouch down" / "what if I can't throw strikes." My pitching was stiff, hesitant and... off target. I walked countless batters, and we lost again.

After the game, the coach expressed his disappointment in losing, and said we are going to practice every evening until our next game. He then turned to me,..... which surprised me because I was trying to be invisible,... and he said, "You're still our pitcher, but You Are going to learn to throw the ball with extreme accuracy."

His statement was an expression of confidence. He had faith in me / he believed in me,... and so I thought, "Sure, that sounds great." Little did I know what that meant.

At the beginning of the next practice, the coach took me aside, and said, "You won't be practising with the rest of the team. Instead I want you to throw the ball into this box for the entire time, and I want you to continue when you get home." He then placed a box on a chair, paced off the proper distance, and had his son fetch the balls for me.

I didn't get to have fun batting or fielding with the rest of the team. Instead, I was practising the discipline of throwing a ball into a box a million times. To be honest, I missed a lot,.... at first. At home, I did self-discipline, and throw the ball at the box for a number of hours,..... because I felt I was worth it / worth the investment.

The next day's practice meant more of the same for me. Just me and my box, and the coaches son,.... except!..... the box was smaller. The box was even smaller the third day, and on the forth the coach said to place it behind the chair and then under the chair.

All my misses were humbling because they reminded me that I was not born the best pitcher in the world /..... I was weak and flawed.

Day after day, hour after hour.... discipline, discipline, discipline...I threw that ball into a stupid box. WHY?

Not because of great will power, and not out of fear.
I did it because ONE, the coach believed in me; he didn't replace me.
And TWO, because I was part of a team. I did not want to let them down. It wasn't all about me.

By the next game, I was much improved, and we won.
That victory was necessary experience. I remembered that I had survived that game.
I continued to throw the ball into the box, for 10 million hours every day.

I began to realize, at the following game, that I could throw the ball any where I pleased. I thought I was an excellent pitcher, and of course we won.

A few weeks later, we played Salem again.
Their little, tiny players stepped in the batter's box and crouched way down,.... and I just smiled..... because I knew the future,..... and it was good!

We never lost another game, and won the championship.

Was I that Good?

I was good not because I could throw the ball with accuracy, but rather because I had a team and a coach who believed in me.
We were a good team.

Typically, we wait until our world is crashing in, and realize that we can't throw anything God's way. When we are overwhelmed, we discover we don't know how to cast our anxiety to God.

Perhaps, we could start with a bigger box / with little things / with the day to of living. I think we could learn to throw our tiny anxieties, beginning with small prayers and simple, short disciplined times of prayer and listening.
And, by so doing, we can gain experience and learn how well God catches our throws... and wants to catch them.

Moreover, as a team, instead of berating those who fail / instead of being quick to point out the errors and flaws, maybe we could offer real help?
Maybe, we could share our experiences of struggling,... and grant words of encouragement – a message of hope and love that says, "I am there with you, even into the unknown."

The nice thing about softball and baseball is that there is no time clock.

So,..... we can start throwing whenever we are ready... because God is willing to wait..... and you and I are worth God's time and investment, but.... there is only one true way to realize that.
Toss the ball,..... and see.