Finding Intimacy in a World of Fear
For my mother, Law Tam Un-Oi,
and my brothers and sisters:
Hung-Kwan Law, Maria Oi-Kam Ho, Stephen Hung-Fai Law,
Michelle Sau-Fong Ng, and Horatio Hung-Yan Law
for their unconditional love for me.
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In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid.
What can a mere mortal do to me?
(Ps. 56:10–11)
I feel incompetent every year when April approaches, because the fifteenth of that month is the deadline for filing my income tax return. As a citizen of the United States of America, I have to report how much I earned in the previous year and pay taxes that support the U.S. federal, state, and sometimes city governments. You would think that someone like me, who got all As in my mathematics classes through high school and college, would be able to figure out how to fill out the income tax forms. Twenty years ago, I attempted to do my own tax return and gave up. I hired a tax preparer to file my income tax, and I have been using him ever since.

Each year, I collect all the receipts, bills, and pay stubs, add up the numbers, and put them into the simplified form that my tax preparer sends me. Then I send the form back to my tax preparer with all the necessary supporting documents. Miraculously, in a few weeks, an inch-thick package arrives in the mail. All I have to do is to write my signature on all the right places and put the proper forms in the proper envelopes. Gleefully, I paste stamps on the envelopes and put them in the mail. Usually, I do not even care about whether I get a refund or not. I am just happy to get it done, so that I avoid getting into trouble with my government. I then put the receipts, bills,
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pay stubs, and the copy of the income tax return forms in a box, label it, and put it away in a safe place so I can find it again, in case I get audited.

Just what am I afraid of? I am paying for my government to protect me and my community. Isn’t that what paying taxes is about? But each year, the forms seem to get more and more complicated. For the year 2005, I had to file tax forms in eight states. To compound things further, I heard on the radio that if you input the exact same numbers in different computer tax-preparation programs, you can end up with different results. Well, how do I know I have gotten it right? Is my tax-preparer using the right program?

I think these complicated forms are there to make me feel incompetent each year and that they are meant to evoke fear. File on time, make sure your numbers do not look suspicious, and hope to God that you will not get audited. Instead of feeling good about having paid the taxes, thereby supporting my government to keep us safe and secure, I paid my tax and was still afraid—not just about not being protected, but fearful of my own government, which would punish me if I did not do my taxes correctly.

The Cause of My Fear

Why was I full of fear? It was only money! If they discovered that I did not pay enough, I would just pay up and pay the fine too. If I could not pay back right away, I could create a payment plan to eventually pay it off. No big deal. Filing my tax late or incorrectly does not link me or my family to imminent danger. With the comfort of knowing that I was not in immediate danger, I reflected further on this fear.

Filing my income tax return is an annual reminder that I cannot trust myself and my ability to complete the necessary forms. Even if I employ a tax preparer or the latest computer technology to help me, I am reminded that they can also make mistakes. It also reminds me that my government does not trust me to do the right thing, so the Internal Revenue Service will randomly pick people to be audited. It also reminds me that I cannot trust my government to use my tax dollars properly. People of my generation are talking pessimistically about the
future of Social Security. Don’t count on getting your share when you retire. Therefore, I, and everyone I know, want to pay as little tax as possible without breaking the tax code. Filing my income tax form each year reminds me of the abusive cycle of distrust and fear between me and my government. Paying taxes becomes a rule and ritual that I must follow or I will be punished. I do it out of fear instead of love for this country and my trust for our civic leaders. I lose sight of the meaning of paying taxes. I lose connection with my government.

A Climate of Fear

The fear I feel around filing my income tax return is only part of the climate of fear that we live in today. It is obvious that since September 11, 2001, a fear of terrorist attacks dominates our minds. However, if we observe the messages that we receive every day through the media, marketers, and politicians, we would see that fear is projected constantly in the form of distrust of ourselves, our community, our government, and even nature.

One night of watching television will show us that we cannot trust friends and family. They can betray us, tell our secrets, and steal our loved ones. We see parents who kill their children and children who murder their parents. Fathers molest their children. We cannot trust our teachers or pastors; they can be molesters of our children too. We cannot trust our neighbors; they can be mass murderers. A terrorist cell can be right around the corner from where we live. We cannot walk down the street without fearing that someone is going to hurt us, rob us—or worse, murder us.

We cannot trust the institutions that were created to help us feel safe. Our police force is supposed to protect us, but how many scandals have we heard that involve the corruption of our police departments? Our courts of law are supposed to help us feel secure, because people know that they will be punished if they commit a crime. But we are also shown, time and time again, in crime-glorifying movies and television shows that if a criminal is smart or rich enough, he or she can get away with murder. We become cynical about our legal system because we do not really believe that it can keep us safe.
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We cannot trust our government because the leaders (even though they are elected by the people to represent the people) are all politically driven—which means, to many people, that they are crooks and liars. They will say and do anything to get our votes. Once they get elected, they do whatever they want for their own gain. Not only are they not working to protect us, they often play on our fears to get us to vote for them:

- “If you do not want to feel the fear that you experienced on September 11, 2001, you should vote for me because I will keep the country safe.”
- “People are addicted to nonrenewable fuel, which pollutes the air that we breathe and causes irreversible global warming that makes this planet uninhabitable. Vote for me and I’ll do something about that for you.”
- “If you let same-sex couples get married, that will destroy the institution of marriage. God will punish us for letting this happen. Vote for me; I’ll do something about that for you.”

We get opposing and conflicting information, all aimed at triggering our fear so that we will do what the different parties want us to do. Some of us are so confused that we end up not trusting anyone in our government.

We can’t trust technology to keep us safe anymore. We have computers and the Internet to provide us with access to information, only to find out that this freedom of information can overwhelm us while providing our children with images and information that are harmful. Worse, Internet predators lurk out there, just waiting to get our children when they are most vulnerable. We have the wonderful technology of mobile phones, only to find that their invisible waves might give us brain cancer. We have created nuclear arms to keep us safe from our “enemies,” only to find out that if someone makes one wrong decision, or if these weapons get in the “wrong hands,” then these weapons can destroy the whole world. Whether these things are true or not, they send the message that we cannot trust technologies, which have been our best ally in addressing our fear.
We cannot trust nature, either. In the 2005–2006 period, nature provided us with hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, floods, droughts, and unbearable killing heat. While I was writing this book, my editor in Tennessee lost his entire house to a tornado. We are told that some horrible natural disasters are being caused by our use of technologies, such as the emissions from our factories and automobiles. Some of us used to think that if we stopped messing with nature, nature would take care of itself, and of us. Now we are told that nature cannot recover quickly, even if we stop abusing the environment.

Life as Risk Management

In this world of fear, everything and everyone is at risk. Life is not about living anymore, but about risk management. For example, in this climate of fear, church is no longer about doing ministry and serving people. It is about minimizing the risk of the pastor or church workers being sued for abuse. It is about reducing the risk of being audited by the IRS for misusing their funds as a nonprofit organization.

Risk management is a reactive process based on fear. It is about distancing ourselves from others whom we have considered to be dangerous and suspicious. Managing risk is about what not to do in fear of being hurt or used. Risk management destroys intimacy because it is based on distrust. When there is no trust, there is no vulnerability. When there is no vulnerability, there is no truth telling. When there is no truth telling, there is no intimacy. When there is no intimacy, there is no community, which is human beings’ primary support for facing their fears.

My Journey through Fear’s Landscape

In this world of fear, we need to find ways to move from risk management to living in faith through Jesus Christ. Living in faith has to do with actively engaging people, the community, and creation in spite of our fear. Living the gospel is about trusting God, and trusting each other as children of God, so that we can be vulnerable, take risks, and tell the truth. And
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the truth will set us free to connect and be intimate with each other and with God. We need this kind of intimacy the most in order to develop communities of trust in which we can face the world of fear together.

This book is my journey through this landscape of fear. I try to understand the purpose of fear as an intuitive response to potential danger, show how fear can help us protect ourselves, and demonstrate how fear can lead us to discover our passion for ministry (chapter 1). Having affirmed the place of fear in our lives, I then explore how the media, marketers, and politicians use fear to get us to pay attention to them. In the process, we can be overwhelmed by the constant projections of fear all around us (chapter 2). Following that, I have looked into how we address our fear through rituals, rules, and technologies—and how, again, marketers and politicians can use these approaches to sell us symbolic substitutes that claim to make us safe (chapter 3). I then investigate the different roles we have been cast in within this arena of fear—the fear-conquerors, the fear-bearers, and the fear-exploiters. I show how God, through Jesus Christ, invites us to be fear-miners, mining gifts from our fear (chapters 4 and 5). I propose that intimacy developed in building trusting communities is the best way to prepare ourselves to address fear constructively (chapter 6). I illustrate this from the biblical story of Elijah and from my own personal experiences, showing that when I give in to fear, God comes and asks, "What are you doing here?, bringing me back to the divine mission and away from focusing on my own condition (chapter 7).

Through this journey, I was most excited when I was able to name the “powers” that have tried to separate us, destroying intimacy, and therefore evoke fear effectively to control others. My attempt to name these “powers” will hopefully help my readers to get a handle on what to do in order to not be controlled by fear-exploiters in our lives, communities, institutions, and nations, but to find ways to achieve intimacy in spite of the fear projected all around us.
Fear, Phobia, Sex, and Ministry

I went to an open house of a condominium for sale on the thirtieth floor of a beautiful building in Vancouver, British Columbia. It had a fairly good-sized balcony that, according to the realtor, was a major selling point of this property. Gingerly, I stepped onto the balcony, making sure that it was solidly built and that the floor was not wet or slippery. As I moved toward the railing, I noticed my heart was pounding a little faster. I pushed against the rail with my hand making sure that it was also secured before I would lean on it. I held onto the rail with one hand while my other hand automatically moved up toward my face. With my index finger pressing against my glasses to make sure they would not fall off my face, I looked over the railing and down. Cars, like toys, moved through the streets below. I thought to myself: no one would survive a fall from this high up. I looked out and saw the magnificent view of the city, with the snow-capped mountains serving as a backdrop. That view was why I stepped out on this balcony on the thirtieth floor.

The Nature of Fear

I have a fear of heights. I used to be embarrassed to admit it until I started doing research for this book. As I read many books
on the subject of fear, I discovered that my fear of heights is normal and justified. Miriam Greenspan, in her book *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, writes:

> Fear arises in any situation where there is a threat of loss or harm to body, mind, and spirit. It is a basic emotion, built into the biological organism. Part of our deepest instinct for survival, fear is our emotion alarm system...Without it, we would be unable to protect ourselves...What fear tells us is that something requires immediate and close attention. Its purpose is to move us to action to protect life. An alarm signal goes off that says: Stop where you are—there's danger ahead.¹

Gavin de Becker, author of *The Gift of Fear*, describes fear as an intuitive response to potential danger:

> When it comes to danger, intuition is always right in at least two ways:
> 1. It is always in response to something.
> 2. It always has your best interest at heart...

Clearly, not everything we predict will come to pass, but since intuition is always in response to something, rather than making a fast effort to explain it away or deny the possible hazard, we are wiser (and more true to nature) if we make an effort to identify the hazard, if it exists. If there is no hazard, we have lost nothing and have added a new distinction to our intuition, so that it might not sound the alarm again in the same situation.²

The intuitive signal of fear invites us to think and then act in ways that will help us avoid the danger, if there is danger ahead. It should not cause us to panic. De Becker continues:

> “The very fact that you fear something is solid evidence that it is not happening. Fear summons powerful

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predictive resources that tell us what might come next. It is that which might come next that we fear—what might happen, not what is happening now...

What you fear is rarely what you think you fear—it is what you link to fear. Take anything about which you have ever felt profound fear and link it to each of the possible outcomes. When it is real fear, it will either be in the presence of danger, or it will link to pain or death. When we get a fear signal, our intuition has already made many connections. To best respond, bring the links into consciousness and follow them to their high-stakes destination—if they lead there. 3

This discipline of linking the fear to the high-stakes or worst-case destination does three things:

1. It helps us determine whether the danger is imminent and therefore requires immediate action. For example, my fear of heights is linked to the physical danger of slipping and falling thirty stories, which is then linked to the fear of ending up smashed on the pavement below. It takes two links to death. No wonder my heart rate went up, my system went into higher alert, and I therefore proceeded with greater caution—checking the balcony floor to make sure it was not slippery and making sure that the railing was solidly built—before I leaned on it. Was I overly cautious? Perhaps. But the bottom line was: I did not trust the railing, the balcony, or the building because I was unfamiliar with it. My fear, which led to my cautious behavior, was justified.

2. Linking a fear to its most terrible destination helps us discern an unwarranted fear and therefore alleviate the anxiety that may be triggered by the fear. For example, if I have a fear of speaking in public, this fear could be linked to the fear of being perceived by my audience as incompetent. This would get back to my boss, and she would fire me. Without a job, I would not be able to pay the mortgage of my home or provide for my family and loved ones. My family would reject me. I would be homeless and alone. I would be perceived by others

3Ibid., 341–42.
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as useless and a burden to society. I might die of hunger or catch some nasty disease. I would not have insurance to pay for my needed care, and I would die. Although I may link the fear of public speaking to death, I can also see that it would be a long and unlikely trip. Linking fear to its most terrible destination helps us distinguish between fear signals that predict real danger and the fears that are not warranted. 4

3. When we are able to link a fear to its ultimate horrible destination, we can begin to see the fear in its wider context. This is like “going on a ‘train ride’ of inquiry: probing the depths of your fear to the final stop or destination, and then widening fear’s story from this end point.” 5 Let me continue with my example of my fear of speaking in public. I took the long train ride and arrived at the final destination, which is death. Now, I knew that it was unlikely that I would die from speaking in public; however, I needed to ask myself: what was the wider story emerging out of this fear? Perhaps it has something to do with me not trusting my own ability—a lack of self-esteem. This one is easy to deal with. I may take a public-speaking class and learn the skills and techniques to give good speeches and be prepared when I am invited to speak in the future. But there is something deeper in this story of fear. It may have something to do with the fear of being rejected by a community. This is linked to my need for a community that accepts me. But doesn’t everybody need to have a loving accepting community independent of one’s ability to perform? This wider context of this fear caused me to spend my time and energy to learn how to develop affirming, accepting communities not just for myself but for others as well. By pondering the wider story of this fear of public speaking, I discovered an area in my personal life about which I can do something to improve. I also discovered a greater need of others, which then becomes a call to the ministry to develop inclusive communities.

Taking the time to ponder my fear often points to opportunities for ministry. My fear of heights is linked to my fear of falling, which is linked to my fear of dying from hitting the

4Ibid., 342–43.
5Greenspan, Healing, 199.
Having done all the cautionary steps to make sure that I am safe from falling, I need to ask myself: What is this fear of falling about? It probably has something to do with losing control, getting hurt, and dying. Now, I have some choices: I can avoid tall buildings, or I can meditate on my fear of uncertainty, loss of control, and death. Avoiding high places only limits the way I live—for example, missing the magnificent view on the mountains on the thirtieth floor balcony. Also, avoiding tall buildings will not help me live longer.

The other choice would be more productive: meditating on my fear of uncertainty, loss of control, and death. My fear of heights informed me that I’m afraid of death, which is a given in life. It tells me that no matter how hard I try to control things around me, they are not going to be totally in my control. This fear is asking me to live my life in the midst of things that I have no control over, and to live it knowing death is going to come. These topics are worth taking time to explore. As I ponder further on this direction, I may realize that the fear of chaos and death is a common experience among many people in the world in which we live. This exploration may lead me to enter a ministry to help people facing the end-stages of their lives. It may direct my attention and energy in creating a safer environment—working to provide more secure and safe jobs, finding ways to insure everyone has adequate healthcare, providing law enforcement organizations that respect the people they protect, etc.6

**Fear and Phobias**

If fear is such a good thing that could point us toward doing needed ministries, why do we have so much trouble dealing with it? Why did I have trouble admitting that I have a fear of heights? Why do people have phobias about so many things? Why do people do irresponsible things, putting themselves and others in danger, just to prove that they have no fear? To reap the fruit of fear requires us to face it head on. It requires the willingness to take that train ride to get to the last stop. However,

6Ibid., 199–201. Greenspan has a similar exploration from fear of falling to finding purposeful actions to improve life around us.
the emotions and physical responses associated with fear are not something that I enjoy. Even when I have worked through a fear, in the end I would say to myself: “I never want to feel that again!”

Yet if we start avoiding fear itself, that is the beginning of our trouble with dealing with fear. It’s not fear but avoiding fear that leads to phobias. Because we are scared to feel fear, we avoid whatever triggers it. It’s the avoidance that locks the phobia in place. Phobias are one result of fear when its energy is toxified by avoidance...It’s the fear of feeling the fear that stops you. If you can feel it, you can heal it...The raw emotion of fear itself is actually not paralyzing but energizing. Fear moves us to act—and if we avoid instead, the fear only grows.7

In the late 1980s, I was working as a campus minister at the University of Southern California. One of my students, David, came to my office and told me that he had been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. In a week, he was hospitalized and then was pronounced as having AIDS. To put this in context, three months before, I presided at a funeral for a graduate student who died of AIDS. I did the funeral because his friends could not find anyone who would do it. I felt the sadness and the pain of his friends and colleagues, but I did not know him personally. Therefore, I was able to maintain a distance from all the emotions surrounding the passing of this young man. It was, however, different with David because I had known him for over two years. AIDS was hitting closer to home this time.

The first time I visited him in the hospital, I sat and spoke with him for a long time. Before I left, I held his hands and we prayed. After I left his room, I immediately went to the bathroom. I washed my hands three times, looked up, saw myself in the mirror, and felt shame. During this time, little was known about the disease and how it was transmitted. My fear, which drove me to wash my hands repeatedly, was perhaps justified. Since so little was known about AIDS, I made the link that if I contracted AIDS by touching him, I might soon die from one of those rare diseases.

As more research on AIDS was done and the results made known to the public, I learned that AIDS was caused by the

7Ibid., 173.
HIV virus. The only way one could contract the HIV virus was by exchanging bodily fluids, especially through the bloodstream. After I learned that, I had no fear of touching people with AIDS.

Even with the helpful knowledge I gained from the most up-to-date AIDS research, I still felt helpless as I watched David withering away. He died three months after he came to my office to tell me he was sick. I felt incompetent as I tried to comfort David's partner and his family at the funeral. The pain of losing a young bright energetic student was a new and almost unbearable sensation. I was a campus minister in a college working with young people at the beginning of their lives; I was not supposed to watch young students dying and to preside at their funerals.

Three months after David died, his partner called and left a message on my office answering machine. I listened to the message with dread. Sure enough, he too was diagnosed as having AIDS. I erased the message; I never wanted to feel the shame, hurt, guilt, and loss again. I justified my action by saying to myself that he was not a student and I did not have any responsibility toward him. The shame and guilt of not returning his call continued to bother me, but I did not want to deal with it. I attempted to shut my feelings down. I did not want to talk about it with anyone, fearing that others might judge me for not having the courage to conquer my fear. I was on the edge of developing a phobia toward people with AIDS.

I could have continued to avoid the fear of AIDS by avoiding having anything to do with the subject. I could have stopped reading any new information about AIDS. But the less I knew, the more I would be fearful of it. I could have continued to avoid dealing people with AIDS. I remember seeing someone with sunken cheeks and an unnaturally dark complexion at the market, and I turned and walked down another aisle to avoid having to see this person face-to-face. The less contact I had with people with AIDS, the more fearful I would be the next time I encountered another person with AIDS. I could have continued to avoid having any discussions with anyone about AIDS. This avoidance could further alienate me from my colleagues and my friends. I could have continued to avoid dealing with my personal feelings of guilt, anger, and loss by
shutting down that part of myself. But the less I knew about how I would react, the more afraid I would be to allow these feelings to be triggered. A phobia—any kind of phobia—inevitably alienates one from oneself and others, creating barriers that one would not want to cross because of the fear of feeling fear.

I was lucky to have friends around me who reached out to me and helped me break out of my potential phobia. The community at the campus ministry, which consisted mostly of students, wanted to know more about AIDS and how Christian spirituality addressed this looming epidemic. We worked together and created a series of workshops on the subject. Our workshop leaders were people who had done a lot of work with AIDS from medical, social science, and religious perspectives. In one of the workshops, a priest who had worked extensively with AIDS patients brought with him a person with AIDS. The two of them guided us in a meditation to get in touch with the experience of a person with AIDS, in the form of the Stations of the Cross. In this meditation, we walked with a person with AIDS as he connected his experience with Christ’s suffering and dying on the cross. I came face-to-face with a person with AIDS while having to acknowledge Christ in that person. Through these programs, I worked my way out of my potential phobia by gaining more knowledge of the disease. I slowly regained the trust in my ability to face this fear. I did this in the midst of a trusting community with which I could share my innermost feeling—my fear. More importantly, we did this in the context of our relationship with God through Christ.

Avoiding Fear: Sexuality

Having fear is not the problem. Fear simply calls us to pay attention to potential danger. It could energize us to act to help ourselves and others to avoid the potential danger. The fear of fear is the issue, because it creates a phobia. As we avoid the feeling of fear, we avoid knowing the vulnerable part of ourselves. The less we know about the vulnerable part of ourselves, the less we are able to connect with others as a whole person. We would not want to enter into a relationship that would risk exposing that vulnerable part of ourselves. Phobia
creates a distance between people, destroying any possibility toward intimacy.

For the last thirty years, the major Protestant denominations have had fierce debates about homosexuality. My reflection on that matter is not that some people are homophobic, but that a wider issue is at work. The issue is that we are sex-phobic.

“How many of you have actually had a conversation about sex and spirituality in your church?” I asked this question at the beginning of a dialogue workshop on sexuality and spirituality. Usually in a group of about fifty people, only three or four persons would raise their hands. The avoidance of talking about sexuality creates a phobia about the subject of sex. Why do we have such a phobia toward this basic part of human life? To answer this question, we first need to explore why we have a fear of sex.

Ernest Becker in his Pulitzer-Prize–winning book The Denial of Death wrote:

Sexuality is inseparable from our existential paradox, the dualism of human nature. The person is both a self and a body, and from the beginning there is the confusion about where “he” really “is”—in the symbolic inner self or in the physical body...The inner self represents the freedom of thought, imagination, and the infinite reach of symbolism. The body represents determinism and boundness. The child gradually learns that his freedom as a unique being is dragged back by the body and its appendages, which dictate “what” he is. This is why it is so difficult to have sex without guilt: guilt is there because the body casts a shadow on the person’s inner freedom, his “real self” that—through the act of sex—is being forced into a standardized, mechanical, biological role. Even worse, the inner self is not even being called into consideration at all; the body takes over completely for the total person, and this kind of guilt makes the inner self shrink and threaten to disappear.8

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We are fearful of sex because it has a direct link to the loss of a major part of our identity—the symbolic inner self. The loss of this part of oneself during the sexual act can be experienced as a temporary death of that part of oneself. Therefore, our fear of sex is directly linked to our fear of death.

For generations, many communities dealt with the fear of sex by prescribing a set of rules and rituals surrounding it. These rules and rituals were there to help us deal constructively with this fear. For example, the contract of marriage made with mutual love assures that the couple can be vulnerable with each other in the sexual act and still maintain the trust that they will not negate each as simply the physical being. Ernest Becker said, “Love…allows the collapse of the individual into the animal dimension without fear and guilt, but instead with trust and assurance that his distinctive inner freedom will not be negated by an animal surrender.”

In the twenty-first century, many rituals and rules are tied to our use of technology. The use of a technology called a condom can be seen as a new rule and ritual that we employ to make sure that we will not let the physical side of ourselves take over completely, but will also take into account the well-being of our partners.

But most often, the rules and rituals became ways people avoid having to deal with the fear of sex. I was invited to a friend’s family gathering. His cousin has a ten-year-old child, who was eating his dessert at the table. As the adults talked freely amongst each other, the word sex was used. The mother of the child gave a dirty look at the offender. A silent scream entered our ears: We’re not supposed to talk about sex in front of the kid!

This avoidance is often enforced in the name of “protecting the children.” However, I speculate that the avoidance is more about the adults’ fear of the subject of sex. I am not advocating that we talk freely about sex with our children. I am inviting the readers to explore how we can communicate this basic part of being human in ways that don’t turn it into a phobia. Most of us, while we were growing up, picked up the signal that sex was a forbidden subject. Even among adults, sex is often a topic.

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*Ibid., 42.*
to be avoided. The less we talk about it, the less we know about the subject, and the fear increases—which causes us to create more rules and rituals to avoid the subject even more, which in turn causes us to know less and less about the subject. Meanwhile, we still yearn to know more about such a basic part of human life.

Then there are the abundant supplies of R-rated and X-rated movies, which show only the physical aspect of sex, with no respect for the spiritual inner self of the partners. This is why pornography is such a threat to many and why we are fearful of it because it actually shows the death of the spiritual inner self. For the same reason, many people fear the medical innovation of contraception and sexual enhancement drugs, because these medical technologies are perceived as focusing only on the physical aspect of sex.

When I went to college at the age of seventeen, I had not had a single conversation with anyone about sexuality at all. My knowledge of sex came from sneaking into R-rated movies and, later, watching X-rated movies at my fraternity. Even in that kind of all-male environment, nobody talked about sex in any meaningful way. We might as well have been watching these explicit sexual acts as isolated individuals. We had a yearning to know more about sex, but we were fearful of having real conversation about it. So we watched these movies and then felt guilty afterward. But the yearning to know did not go away.

Dealing with Sexuality

I was blessed with a campus minister who was not afraid to deal with sexuality as it relates to our spirituality. I remember that in one of the Bible study sessions in my third year in college, he surprised us—faculty, staff, graduate students, undergraduate students, and spouses—by engaging in an open dialogue about sex. Instinctively, he knew that if he had told us that we were going to talk about sex, we would act according to our phobia and shy away from attending. I had to admit that I and a few others were more than a little embarrassed. I remember that at the end of that dialogue session, I felt a real sense of community. This sense of community came from the established trust through which I felt I could be vulnerable and tell the truth of
what I knew and did not know about the topic. The phobia that was imposed on me was broken, and real intimacy was achieved by facing this fear. In my case, the phobia was ambushed into a discussion on this forbidden subject.

At another dialogue session on sexuality and spirituality, we explored how humankind, beyond our physical bodies, had minds that could think great thoughts and spirits that could create new things. We were made in the image of God with many divine attributes. This creative part of ourselves sometimes went too far, and we began to think that we were gods ourselves. But sex reminded us, in no uncertain terms, that we were tied to our bodies, which were tied to pain, aging, and decay. We could do nothing about this decay of the body, which eventually leads to death. We concluded that sex humbled humankind into realizing that we were just human and not God.

You might ask, How did we get from talking about sex to the subject of idolatry? This has been a recurring experience—facing our fear and breaking out of our phobia can lead us to surprising new places. If we are willing and able to face our fear, we can move into exciting exploration of our lives in relationship with ourselves, others, and God.

The tragedy of AIDS had a positive effect, because it opened up a dialogue about sex on most college campuses in the form of talks about safer sex. The challenge of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community to the church is not just about gaining acceptance but instead is a challenge to the church community to deal with its fundamental fear of sex itself. If we are to move through these challenges constructively and faithfully, we must treat them as opportunities for the community to explore and undo a collective phobia about a fundamental aspect of human life. If we are able to face this together, we might discover a new arena of ministries that enable people to develop ways to value both the physical and spiritual aspect of their relationship. We might discover a ministry that guides people to achieve real intimacy in a world of fear.

Facing Our Fears

Having fear is not the problem. Avoiding fear is. To reap from fear the fruit of ministry, we must learn to face our fear by
following it, probing it, tracing it, and linking it to the most
terrible destinations—usually meaning those involving pain,
suffering, chaos, isolation, and death. Only then can we see
the wider vision of what this fear is calling us to do.

From the time Jesus was betrayed, all of the male disciples
of Jesus were nowhere to be found. They were hiding because
of their fear. They were avoiding being perceived as having
anything to do with Jesus, as evidenced by Peter's denial of
Jesus three times. Not only were they fearful; they were avoiding
fear, distancing themselves from Jesus—now a symbol of
rejection, loss, suffering, pain, and possibly death.

But not the women.

Many women were there, watching from a distance.
They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his
needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the
mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebe-
dee's sons. (Mt. 27:55–56, NIV)

The women followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem and
witnessed all the things that had happened. They were there,
in spite of their fear, witnessing Jesus’ ministry that led him to
the ultimate terrible destination of death. In both Matthew and
Mark’s gospels, they were portrayed as watching Jesus dying on
the cross from a distance. In John’s gospel, the three Marys
were even closer. “Near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and
his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magda-
lene” (Jn. 19:25).

They were there, sharing the pain and suffering, grieving
their loss, expressing their emotions in the open. They were
there with Jesus to his final breath. They were there when the
Romans took Jesus down from the cross. They were there when
Jesus was entombed. But this was not the end of the story. “After
the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary
Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb” (Mt.
28:1, NIV).

The Sabbath was a time to recollect oneself and reconnect
with God. I am sure that the women did that. They might have
pondered on the wider implication of the story of Jesus that
they had witnessed. What did all this mean? Perhaps they went
back to the tomb out of a sense of duty. Perhaps they went back ready to accept the final defeat—that Jesus was dead—and that their greatest fear had come true. Nevertheless, they went back. In their willingness to face this final destination, they discovered something unexpected!

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. (Mt. 28:5–8, NIV)

The women were still afraid, but something was different: they were filled with joy. They headed back to Galilee, where they had started the journey with Jesus years ago. Their courage to face their fear to its final destination moves them beyond death—their most dreaded fear. There, they receive a call to go home, where they would start the journey again with renewed energy, and vision for ministry.

The story of Jesus as recorded in the four gospels in the Bible provides the linkages, the train ride, in taking our fear to its ultimate destination—death. There, we are invited to open ourselves to the resurrection—to go home and accept our responsibilities as disciples of Jesus; to name our fear, to face our fear, to live through our fear, to have compassion on others who are fearful, and to say to them what the angel said to the women at the empty tomb, what Jesus said to his friends when he appeared to them after his resurrection: Do not be afraid.

“Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.” (Rev. 1:17b–18)