

A Note to the Reader

Fear is a four-letter word, an F-word. And like the other word with that label, it resonates far, spreads across many boundaries, sinks to the lowest levels, becomes very big very quickly.

As a professional skier and teacher, I have kept close company with fear, tracking its path in both my life and the lives of my students. In this book, I offer you ideas, stories, strategies, as well as a few flights of imagination distilled from twenty years of working with fearful students. I often use skiing as a metaphor, but it should remain just that—to clarify our intricate relationship with fear and invite into our lives the power of surrender. So for all those who do not ski, welcome. I hope the metaphor stays transparent, and that through fear's straightforward, often obvious expression in skiing, we can discern its more subtle turns when it sneaks closer to the core of our lives.

One of my first entanglements with fear occurred not on a mountain at all but in the tame environment of a local pool where I worked at seventeen as a swim teacher. There, standing in the shallow end, I held Tommy, a 250-pound man with hair all over his body, trembling in my arms as he tried to lower his head back to reach the water. He could not do it. As soon as his vision left the security of his surroundings—the table where his wife sat shaded by an umbrella, the dry aquamarine above the water line, the white coping at the pool's edge—as soon as matter gave way to only sky above him, his fists flailed in the air. He grabbed at my shoulders as he struggled to right himself again. My arms soon tired but my mind continued to race: how to get Tommy to do what he was paying me for, to help him achieve his one goal, to float on his back. And behind my mind's frenetic pace emerged what was to become a familiar question in my life, "What is this fear about?"

"Can you teach my Tommy?" the woman on the phone had asked, responding to my ad for private lessons. "He's so frightened of water, he can't even take a bath." I said yes immediately, revealing both my audacity and my ignorance. I was so sure Tommy was her son that I never bothered to ask his age. And I never doubted that I could entice the small boy I imagined into the water. I gathered every toy I could find, some to float, some to sink.

When a couple with an infant approached the pool, it slowly dawned on me: the large man wearing a bathing suit was "my Tommy." I followed his eyes down to the pile of toys. Using a teenager's facility with quick lies, I scrambled to explain, "So you can learn how to play with your new baby in the water!" But that did not help me face the real issue: I had no clue what I was going to do. I had jumped headlong into the sink-or-swim cliché.

By the side of the pool, we touched the water with one hand, one foot, then the other. After half an hour, we were up to our waists, softening the knees, bouncing, again and again, deeper, feeling the water slip up to our chests. Too far! Tommy grabbed me, breathing so fast I thought he was about to cry. We stood straight, the water back down at our waists, safe. Very slowly, we began again. Tommy's huge biceps would involuntarily contract, making his hands and fingers clench into distorted, odd-shaped fists.

This is fear, I remember thinking. Real fear. Not just being afraid.

Just being afraid meant to me the feeling Tommy felt, a feeling I could sense and respond to. This was more. I supported Tommy with my arms as he leaned farther back, his eyes squeezed shut, his face pained. Carefully, I softened my hold so his body stretched deeper into the water. He tightened. I responded, strengthening my support. Back and forth we danced—leading, following, resisting, softening—both of us entangled and wet within the fear. The fear no longer belonged only to Tommy; I could touch it, but even more importantly, I was being touched by it.

Recalling this event now is like recognizing the face of an adult in their baby picture. I could not know then that I would be working with frightened students for much of my life, or how this event would register a small but seminal shift in my perception of fear. Although I could not articulate it at the time, I had veered from the modern, Western perception that we "own" our emotions, that we can and should control them, and that they exist solely inside of us. As I perceived love to be real, with its own volition and power and sudden movements, so I perceived fear. And like love, fear could catch us, body, mind, heart and soul.

I have been afraid many times. As a kid, that fear lived on the back side of thrill. I grew up in Windham, a small town in New York's Catskill Mountains, and began skiing at age three. I remember at ten rolling into an aerodynamic tuck behind my older brother to schuss a steep, roughly packed trail from the top of the mountain to the bottom, yelling "shi-i-it!" the whole way. Through my teenage years, training as a ski racer at Burke Mountain Academy in Vermont, my relationship with fear grew more refined. I began to call it "the black door." I knew that if I stepped through that door, there was no going back. I had to trust my body to react and act on its own. The real trick in racing seemed to be getting through that door, leaving behind what was known, controllable, and therefore, safe.

After college, I began to teach skiing. I didn't draw a distinction between what I had felt as a racer and what my beginners were experiencing. In fact, I was most powerfully drawn to those skiers who had the greatest sensitivity to fear. They understood, viscerally, the inherent tension skiing offered: the pull between control and surrender, technique and freedom, fear and thrill. And they displayed unusual emotional courage. I experimented with strategies I had used in racing, tweaking them to serve each student. I began asking for students who were frightened, much to my supervisor's surprise because no other instructor wanted them. In 1987, Leila Brown, Howard Savin, and I started Ski Windham's first "fear workshop." Four students were courageous enough to sign up.

Vomiting, hyperventilating, uncontrollable trembling can all happen to frightened skiers on a hill, and non-skiers often ask me, "Why would anyone do that to themselves? Why not just stay indoors?" I wondered the same thing until one student said to me, "I have tried to ski every winter for fifteen years and I've never been able to go downhill without holding onto the instructor. You're my last chance."

She predicted my question.

"I don't want to be a skier," she explained. "I just want to let myself go down the hill. Once. Feel my body just do it. I haven't been able to trust that it could. Just for a second, I want to feel that trust." She wanted to pass through the black door.

In 1984, I started competing again, this time to qualify as an examiner for the Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA). Once qualified, I could conduct clinics and examine teachers around the eastern United States. With my nerves inflaming on a regular basis, I could now study fear from the perspective of performer and athlete as well as teacher. Conventional sport psychology with its emphasis on behavioral conditioning was no help, given its obsession with control, and its sterile, scientific language.

As a writer as well as skier, I knew how fear arose whenever I had to let go of control so a story or poem could emerge. I felt the same fear when I had to give up the tendency to micromanage my body before an athletic feat. So why, I wondered, would we approach fear by grasping for more control? Wouldn't we then lose the power of surrender? The possibility for innovation? As an instruction manual would be to an artist, sport psychology was to me as an athlete, arriving after the fact, prescribing step-by-step programs where originality should be the rule.

When my personal investigation into fear changed its context from racing to PSIA's competitions, my understanding broadened. The one god of racing is and always will be speed, with the supremely elegant efficiency that requires. Now I needed to recognize other qualities as well, like accuracy, finesse, freedom, and flair. I found that each part of the competition—from skiing in bumps, powder, slush and ice to slow, controlled demonstrations, from charismatic teaching and public speaking to technical knowledge—each challenge wore its own face of fear, which in turn required a different response. Fear of speed is easy to imagine, but what about fear of slowness, fear of silence, fear of the initial anarchy of a group when a genuine synergy is about to emerge . . . ?

Each time I expanded the context for competition or the forum for teaching, my ideas about fear broke down, sometimes irreparably. This kept my engagement both vital and scary. I was becoming known in the ski industry for my "fear work" and yet I rarely stood on firm ground. The only thing I could be sure of was that fear, just like Tommy, would continue to offer me what I had never dealt with before. Not only did I not have a degree in psychology, I could actually guarantee my ignorance. I was usually my first guinea pig, but every student was one as well, and each challenge, difficult at the time, demanded a deeper look, an opening previously concealed.

In 1992, I tried out for the Alpine Demonstration Team (called in the industry the national demo team). Every four years, PSIA holds a six-day competition at Snowbird, Utah. Each of the country's nine regions chooses its candidates who will compete. From that pool, the judges select thirteen team members.

I arrived at Snowbird well prepared and with a lot of support, but I choked. I could not, even while skiing on my own, feel anything from my waist down. As if I were trapped in a bubble, I felt cut off from the undulations of the mountain, oblivious to what lay ahead or even beneath me. As a teacher, this was an important response to study, but even more important was accepting the failure that followed. I had lectured about the fertility of failure. I had empathized with many worthy teachers who had failed exams. I had quoted Churchill and Gurdjieff on the subject, but I had never failed a PSIA exam before. I was stunned by its effect. I felt like a rejected lover, even though I had always pretended my involvement in skiing and PSIA was a peripheral passion. But we can never anticipate what will tear the soul open. I felt the winds blow through, and those winds kept me reflective, raw, smarting, and still fascinated with fear.

Four years later when I went back to Snowbird to try out for the team again, I had none of my previous innocence. I was no longer under the illusion that being well prepared would protect me. And my ears stayed closed to the bumper sticker slogans around me, especially the best-will-prevail or give-it-all-you-got varieties that our culture spouts so prolifically. I knew I could step through a hole at any moment and be dragged down by the fear that lurked close. But for the previous four years, I had grappled with that fear. Our relationship, though still lively and unpredictable, had grown increasingly complex and substantial. That complexity helped me succeed on the second try.

As a national demo team member, I expanded my work beyond the East. I traveled from Maine to Alaska giving "fear workshops," continually testing the ideas that form the core of this book. I lectured and led clinics for teachers to help them help fearful students, then trained trainers to train teachers. All across the country, I found instructors familiar with fear. Their years of experience as well as their finely chiseled questions helped clarify the ideas you'll find here.

Training teachers kept my work balanced between practical techniques on the one hand and ideas that directed and strengthened intuition on the other. This book reflects both that balance and that tension. The sight of a student stuck halfway down a slope trembling and crying while five others are waiting at the bottom can be terrifying for even veteran instructors. They needed nuts-and-bolts strategies. But I also found that what fear demanded was a flexible, resourceful intuition. I was able to offer stories and ideas that helped teachers respond to their students intuitively rather than programmatically. If they were to help people ski on the edge, I wanted to encourage them to teach on the edge.

We all squeeze different ideas and feelings into the word fear: fear of the unknown, fear of not being able to work next week, fear of failure, of losing control, of aging, of falling down, of being carried up in a chairlift, fear of the body reacting and fear of the body not reacting, even the fear of saying the word fear. This book does not attempt to define fear or to explain why a frightened person experiences certain physiological responses. It does not separate students into categories or classify symptoms. Others have done a good job at that.

What this book does attempt is to offer you both audacity and comfort. Although comfort feels quiet, it arrives through a bold move: accepting the presence of fear. To do this, we must pick our way between two powerful tendencies, to control and to cure, the Scylla and Charybdis of our culture. These tendencies show themselves constantly in words like manage, handle, overcome, conquer, dispel, banish, fix . . . By regarding fear as a pathology to control or cure, we assume that life without its presence is possible, normal, or even desirable. But once we accept fear as a habitual acquaintance in an imaginative, meaningful life, we can begin to cultivate a conversation with it rather than a fight.

The word conversation contains many verbs—pause, respond, yell, sigh, reflect. But in our conversation with fear, to listen might be the most difficult and the most important action we do. "Now when my hands start to shake and my mouth goes dry," one man said to me, "I think, here it is again. Fear. Keep going but keep listening. I'm slowly learning how to listen without falling to pieces." Luckily, we have our entire lives to learn.

This book emerged from the convoluted give-and-take between student and teacher, a potluck of fear, pressure, humor, generosity, empathy, resourcefulness, and love. Although I have now broadened my work beyond the ski world, I still feel grateful to the collective insight and response skiing has generated. In the spirit of that gratitude, may this book help you take heart, a word which was once synonymous with courage.

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