

**The Understanding of Fear and the Power of Progress**

An Address Delivered by  
Mark A. Riccobono, President  
At the Banquet of the Annual Convention  
Of the National Federation of the Blind  
Orlando, Florida  
July 5, 2016

I am seven years old. I sit at the window of my bedroom in the early evening. The Midwest air is a beautiful balance of refreshing and warm. Listening to the sounds of summer, I contemplate my own hopes and dreams. The uncertainty of life comes to mind, and it sends shivers through my entire body. All I feel is fear. Do I run, or do I stay? Do I engage the fear, or do I let it shut me down? Does fear own me, or do I own it?

American author H. P. Lovecraft said, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." President Franklin D. Roosevelt remarked that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," while first lady Eleanor Roosevelt gave us the more actionable advice, "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."

What is fear? Is it positive or negative? Why does fear matter and what, if anything, does it have to do with blind people? At its basic level, fear is a physical and emotional response to some external stimulus. Sometimes the stimulus is known—like a loud, unexpected crash in the middle of the night—but often the trigger for fear is subconscious and is not easily traced. Science tells us that some aspects of fear are evolutionary, a hardwired set of autonomic responses that have been critical to our survival. There is debate about the number of evolutionary fears but two are commonly referenced—the fear of falling and the fear of loud sounds. Evolutionary fears may also be the root of other fears—consider, for example, the fear of heights—but there are many fears that do not show evidence of being hardwired into our brains.

Scientists categorize fears that are not evolutionary as conditional. Conditional fears are developed through a complex set of interactions with the world and often through observing the behaviors of others. One of the best-known psychological projects producing empirical evidence of the conditioning of fear is the “Little Albert” experiment that was performed by John B. Watson and his graduate student, Rosalie Rayner, at Johns Hopkins University. These researchers presented an infant child named Albert with fuzzy things that would not have otherwise been scary and, at the same time, they produced a loud sound triggering the evolutionary fear. The result was that poor little Albert was conditioned to fear the fuzzy things every time he saw them, even without the noise. While most of the conditional fears we develop are not as explicitly established as were little Albert’s, you can probably think of a number of circumstances in your own life that created conditional fears. I am certain that you can also recall instances where fear was used to alter your behavior. The biological fear response is most often triggered by very stressful circumstances that create a negative association with the feeling of fear.

Not all aspects of fear are negative. Nelson Mandela said, “The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” Examining the definitions of fear in the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, we find another aspect of fear: “To be in awe of; (or) revere.” Baltimore-born author and poet C. JoyBell C. advises, “Don't be afraid of your fears. They're not there to scare you. They're there to let you know that something is worth it.” The other side of fear—the positive power to stimulate action and unlock potential—is generally underestimated. If we resolve ourselves to face our fears, respect the power within those fears, and turn that power into action, we can take control of our own destiny, diminish the negative fears of others, and raise our expectations.

Blindness persists as being one of the most feared situations in the world. It is a fear as old as mankind. It has been passed down through centuries of tragic stories and by self-appointed caretakers who have utilized the fear of blindness to generate funding for their sheltering programs. Despite the conditioned fear associated with blindness, blind people have come to face the fear and have proved it to be unfounded. Not just one, or two, or ten extraordinary blind people but thousands of blind people from diverse backgrounds and with varied talents have made the case for seventy-six years that it is not blindness that is to be feared but rather the low expectations and misconceptions about blindness. We have walked alone and marched together; we have tested the possibilities and we have not found the limits; we have faced the fear and we have transformed it to hope—we are the National Federation of the Blind.

One of the significant ways that people have been conditioned to fear blindness is through literature that perpetuates misconceptions about the blind. In his 1974 banquet address to the National Federation of the Blind, President Kenneth Jernigan examines the nine blindness-related themes in literature, which he describes as "*blindness as compensatory or miraculous power, blindness as total tragedy, blindness as foolishness and helplessness, blindness as unrelieved wickedness and evil, blindness as perfect virtue, blindness as punishment for sin, blindness as abnormality or dehumanization, blindness as purification, and blindness as symbol or parable.” These themes can be further collapsed into the two sides of fear—creating a sense of anxiety or a sense of awe. It does not matter which side of fear is triggered, as the biological reaction cannot be differentiated by most individuals. Most sighted people do not have experience with the blind and this feeds the fear of the unknown.* For these individuals the conditioned fear of blindness is based on the perceived difference between the sighted and the blind. The themes of blindness in literature gain their power through the biological triggers that take place when the fear instinct is evoked. In our current society we have many forms of media that can be used to exploit these themes and trigger fear. Consider the pending release of a new thriller by Sony Pictures, *Don’t Breathe*, in which a blind man—who is assumed to be an easy target, always locked away in his house—terrorizes some would-be burglars who seek to take advantage of his perceived limitations. While playing on the conditioned fear of blindness might be a good plot for a horror film, it only works because of the low expectations that exist. The filmmakers are betting that the audience will understand that a blind person will not be able to perceive the threat coming, will certainly not be able to put up a fight, will not have much need for his fortune, and will not be expected to be evil. When things get really tense, we can predict that the plot twist will turn to total darkness—that mysterious land where the blind, through their super sensitivity (don’t even breathe or we will hear you), are perceived to have a slight advantage. The impact of this film on society will be to perpetuate the perceived differences between the sighted and the blind and deepen the conditioned fear—even if it does make this Halloween really interesting for us.

It is easy to imagine how blindness has come to be such a powerful trigger for fear. Any sighted person at any time can create the mental illusion that they know the experience of being blind. I would assert that blindness above any other characteristic is so easily simulated in those who do not live with it daily—a sighted person need only close their eyes—that many sighted people establish a subconscious view of blindness without much intentional effort. In fact the temptation is so subconscious that I suspect a number of sighted people in the room tonight just closed their eyes for a brief moment. How many times have you been told by someone that they tried to spend an hour with their eyes closed or they were temporarily blinded by something, and how it resulted in fear? Although those of us who understand the truth about blindness and live with it every day recognize that those brief experiences do not reflect our lives, we can appreciate how easy it is to establish the link between fear and blindness. The perceived knowledge of what it is like to be blind and the link to the fear trigger is what makes the conditioned image of blindness a powerful literary and marketing tool, and it is the formula that perpetuates the myths generation after generation.

Although we in the National Federation of the Blind have made tremendous progress in breaking down the misconceptions about blindness, much of the society around us continues to fall for the trap of conditioned fear. Unfortunately, some of the most harmful contributions to the fear come from individuals and organizations closely associated with the blind—often packaged as an attempt to validate the need for greater funding and research. The combination of the perceived expertise of individuals working with the blind and the use of triggers for the conditioned fear of blindness is one of our greatest barriers to full integration into society.

Consider a recent study commissioned by the Association for Research and Vision in Ophthalmology (ARVO), which says it is the largest eye and vision research organization in the world. In September 2014 they held a press conference detailing the findings of a poll that was conducted to examine the attitudes of people about blindness and the perceived value of research funding. Among their findings they show that blindness ranks among the top four "worst things that could happen to you" for all of their respondents. Although this research illuminates how powerful the fear factor of blindness continues to be today, it also exploits that misunderstanding to promote the need for more funding for prevent-blindness research. The public message is that blindness is most feared but the actual data collected tell a slightly different story. The poll administrators asked the question, “Which of the following diseases or ailments is the worst that could happen to you?” Respondents were given five choices and the order of the choices is notable: blindness, cancer, HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer’s disease, and not sure. While the public spin is that blindness was most often selected, the researchers do not emphasize that “not sure” ranked higher than blindness for every subgroup of individuals sampled. Since the selection of blindness fits the desired result, there was no attempt to explore whether the selection of “not sure” told us anything different about the understanding of blindness. To further emphasize the fear factor, the respondents were asked—presumably regardless of how they answered the previous question—“Which of the following would concern you as a consequence of losing your vision?” The choices of response were limited to independence, productivity, quality of life, other, and not sure. Not surprisingly, independence and quality of life were top responses in the face of an existing fear about blindness and no information about the tools and techniques that blind people use to live the lives we want. The researchers then predictably turned their questions to the importance of funding for research to prevent blindness. Responses were collected to the statement: “The federal government spends an average of $2.10 per person each year on eye and vision research, would you say that is…” and the respondents could choose, “not enough, enough, too much, or not sure.” The reported finding—that illuminates further the fear of blindness—is that the majority of people feel that there is not enough money spent on research. The insightful finding that is not emphasized is that among the subgroup that was least likely to choose blindness as their top concern, only 35 percent said that the funding amount was not enough. It seems like common sense that those who fear blindness will want more research to be a priority, but why do the researchers fail to highlight the priority of those less likely to fear blindness? The entire poll is designed to amplify the conditioned fear of blindness for a political purpose. No discussion of rehabilitation training is included in this survey. No examination of misconceptions about the capacity of the blind is explored. No data is collected about experience with successful blind people. The entire promotional package of the survey findings serves to further deepen the conditioned fear of blindness. Fear has the power to generate action, and the researchers want to mobilize support for more funding.

The conditioned fear of blindness goes well beyond surveys. Many people have internalized the fear and project it onto blind people in ways that significantly limit our lives. This most often surfaces in the form of safety concerns. How many times have you been walking down the street using a long white cane, when suddenly a kind and mysterious stranger takes it upon themselves to be the guardian angel that makes sure your cane touches nothing in the environment, because that would simply put you too close to danger? “There is a pole ahead.” “You are coming up to a street.” Or my personal favorite: “You are getting ready to run into a wall.” Although most of these incidents are annoying, they can be shrugged off or used as opportunities to educate our fellow citizens and demystify blindness. The problem comes when the conditioned fear of blindness results in actions that have far more painful consequences. What impact is there on the blind mother who is denied custody of her child because there will not be a person with vision to protect the child in the home? What options are there for the blind young man who is let go from a job installing technology in an environment where his presence is perceived as a safety issue? What message is sent to the military veteran who goes blind later in life and is advised to retreat to a care facility rather than live in his own home? How painful is it when every career dream a blind person has is extinguished by an unimaginative rehabilitation counselor? Where are the opportunities for the blind student who is barred from physical education, math, or dozens of other academic activities? And, how does a blind child build independence when she is told she cannot use a cane without supervision because she has not yet perfected the technique and might get hurt?

Often the limits placed on us are expressed through products and services. Dozens of products in the marketplace, solutions under research, and best practice guidelines for making the world safe for the blind attempt to emphasize the differences and play on conditioned fear. A simple Google search reveals many pages with guidelines for making a home or business safe for the blind, especially the newly blind older adult. Although many of the safety tips are useful reminders for all people, the guidelines gain power when amplified by the conditioned fear of blindness and they strengthen the perceived difference between the blind and the sighted. The fear trigger is initiated by common statements such as, “Often, it is our homes that can pose the greatest risks to our safety especially if you are blind or visually impaired.”

Apparently, blindness also limits our ability to use our arms. Consider the PUSHUP GRID™. The manufacturer tells us, “Some of the common fitness activities in which individuals who are Blind/Visually Impaired participate include yoga, stationary bike riding, aerobics, basketball, jumping rope, and weight training. With the introduction of the PUSHUP GRID™ Pushup Training and Assessment Mat, the pushup exercise can now be added to this list with very little modification.” The video demonstrating this tactile mat tells us that “after a few instructional sessions some individuals may be able to execute pushups independently.” Upon further investigation, we find that this mat simply happens to have tactile features and that the real innovation is making it easy for everyone to perform proper pushups with each hand at the same distance from the center of the body. Products that include a broad set of features for a diverse range of individuals should be celebrated for being well designed. Why must the marketers give the appearance that blind people have special difficulty performing pushups? Whether it is because they truly believe that we require special treatment to perform pushups or they recognize that a convenient marketing angle to drive sales is to play on the misconceptions, the underlying root of the problem is the conditioned fear of blindness and the action that the fear inspires.

Another popular method for triggering the conditioned fear of blindness is through the topic of food. The horrors faced by blind people in dealing with eating are discussed in podcasts, perpetuated through specialized products, and celebrated in “Dining in the Dark” activities. The *Blind Abilities* podcast recently shared the suggestion that one solution to eating out is to develop the courage to ask your waiter to cut your meat for you. Is that really the way we want to engage with the world? Fear feeds fear. The harmful messages sometimes reach broader than we think. Two months ago I was at a restaurant in Chicago with some leaders of the Federation, enjoying a nice meal when—without our asking—our steaks were presented already cut for our convenience. Needless to say, that steakhouse is one cut below the rest. Despite the myths, I suspect that the assembled crowd here tonight prepared for our banquet with joyful anticipation rather than fearful anxiety.

When the product inventors are blind, we face an additional challenge. Take, for example, the Stress Less Drink Holder™ for the blind. The drink holder—which consists of a plastic tray with a safety cup holder and raised edges to contain spills—was created by a retired engineer who went blind. Here is a talented man who has had a successful career and who has absorbed all of the conditioned messages of fear about blindness. He faces a real problem of embarrassment as he adjusts to his own vision loss and he has created a product that he believes will give blind people greater independence and hope. If the product were built out of meanness or to make fun of blind people, we should be outraged. However, this product was built to solve what one person has been conditioned to perceive as a significant problem. It was built by a blind person who has not yet faced the fear with the understanding that tens of thousands of us have come to know through our active participation in the National Federation of the Blind. It was built by a man who needs us. The challenge for us is how we help this blind person channel his innate talent and potential, and similarly to help the thousands of others out there who have not yet come to understand the true impact of the conditioned fear of blindness in our lives.

We reject the persistent feeding of this fear and the real harmful impact it has on the lives of blind people every day. While there is value in medical research and the development of meaningful accessible products and best practices, they fail to provide value to society when they are built upon fear. The real value to our society comes from giving blind people access to quality training and the confidence to meet the conditioned fear of blindness and disarm its false limits. Some want the fear to own us, but we know the truth, and we own our own lives. We have walked alone and marched together; we have tested the possibilities, and we have not found the limits; we have faced the fear, and we have transformed it to hope—we are the National Federation of the Blind.

The greatest opportunity for changing the conditioned fear of blindness rests within each of us as blind people. We must challenge ourselves to recognize that we all, blind and sighted, have fears, can face those fears, and must turn those fears into a source of power. This requires each of us to have the courage and humility to go beyond the limits of the conditioned fear of blindness. It also requires us to face the fear that comes from pursuing the untapped power within us to test our own assumptions, reach for new heights, and do the things we believe we cannot do.

No blind person is immune from the conditioned fear of blindness. In the National Federation of the Blind we know that blindness is not the characteristic that defines us or our future. We also know that in order to make this statement true, we, as blind individuals, need to develop the understanding and utilize the nonvisual techniques that will allow us to take control of our lives. More importantly, we recognize that we need to face the conditioned fears and challenge them on a daily basis. For those blind people who may still be immobilized by their conditioned fears, now is the time to act. It likely means standing at a street corner for a long time until you decide to take that first step. It might mean building a hot fire and learning to grill your favorite summer meal and, like all new chefs, potentially burning it. And it almost always means talking with blind people who have fought through the frustration and anger that comes with breaking down those conditioned fears about blindness. Regardless of where you are in that process, there are thousands of others who have been there before you who are ready to support you in that journey. And once you have begun to face those conditioned fears, we need you to help teach others to do the same.

Regardless of how much training, experience, and confidence any blind person has accumulated, each of us encounters the negative impact of conditioned fears on a daily basis. By working together, we continue to remind each other that this space—the space that we create together—where we raise expectations, challenge our fears, and encourage each other to go further is the normal experience in a world where we minimize the unfounded fears about blindness. The challenge for us is neither the training nor our own internal confidence; it is the continued struggle against the impact of the conditioned fears of others. When we go out in the world, there is no way to avoid encountering the impact of the misconceptions about blindness. We must recognize the fear exists, prevent others from using it to control our lives, and find new ways to overturn those fears. This demands us to be firm but also loving with those who act with sincerity. It also demands that we face outright cases of discrimination with action. We must have the courage and the maturity to be honest about the difference. We must also guard against accepting second-class treatment out of convenience to ourselves. For example, each of us knows that the airport is one of the places where the conditioned fear of blindness is going to be in evidence. It is sometimes tempting, especially after a long and intense convention, to simply go along and not challenge the low expectations that others wish to force upon us—constantly asking us where we are going, trying to get us to ride the electric cart or not to ride the escalator, pushing and pulling us, insisting that we pre-board, offering to walk us down the jet way so we do not get lost, attempting to take our canes away, inviting us to stay seated in an emergency until someone comes to help, serving us drinks with a lid and a straw, and the list goes on. The decision for us is whether we choose to contribute to the conditioned fear of blindness by giving up control, or to work actively to eliminate the fears by using our full capacity. Each of us has the opportunity, and I would argue the responsibility, to take the unrestricted view of blindness and to spread it broadly through our actions. If we do not take control of it, over time it will slowly gain more and more power over us. This requires us to constantly review our own actions, challenge our own assumptions, carry our portion of the responsibility, and never settle for second best.

We cannot stop there. If we truly desire to live the lives we want there is one more powerful step we must take. We need to learn to positively harness the power of fear in our lives. Those who claim that they have no fear in their life are failing to utilize their potential to live their life fully. Consider love for example, which I believe to be more powerful than any other influence. It is impossible to love without feeling some degree of fear. That is the fear my wife and I faced when we held our first child, our second child, and our third child, and the fear that we continue to face when considering their future. Positive situations also create uncertainty and trigger the fear emotion. If we act in awe of fear rather than acting in fear of fear, we can unlock the power that fear gives us. Fear gives us the awareness that we are getting outside of our comfort zone and challenging ourselves to go beyond the previous limits. When we choose to face fear and recognize that fear represents our own power to act, we take greater control over our own lives. As individuals we can choose to own the power and command our destiny; as a movement we must dare to focus the power and use it to create hope and opportunity.

Imagine how the world will be different because the blind resolve to conquer fear. Imagine what we can do for society in a world where the conditioned fear of blindness does not exist. Imagine a world where the conditioned fear of blindness is so diminished that it no longer ranks in the surveys, generates the sales, or captivates the filmmakers. Imagine not just the impact on you and me; imagine the enormous benefit to every individual on this planet in the future. The conditioned fear of blindness and so many other conditioned fears significantly and artificially limit the human race. When we succeed in lifting one more fear from the consciousness of humanity, there will be more space for the power of potential that exists among us. Imagine the hope that grows when fear no longer flows.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Blindness Learning in New Dimensions (BLIND, Inc.)—a training center affiliated with the National Federation of the Blind. At BLIND, Incorporated, blind individuals are challenged daily to break down their conditioned fears about blindness and to face the fears they will have from pursuing their dreams. During a seminar that I was honored to lead with the students and staff, I was asked to describe my top fear for the National Federation of the Blind. I answered by saying that my greatest fear is that we as blind people will get too comfortable with the progress we have made. Today is the best time in history to be a blind person. We have made tremendous progress. We have more opportunities than at any time before. Some might be tempted to get comfortable with the illusion that we have equality in society. Some might fear that we cannot reach any higher for blind people. Some might have bought into enough of the conditioned fear of blindness to believe that we no longer need the National Federation of the Blind. However, our experience over seventy-six years gives us the perspective to know that we have not reached the top of our climb, and an honest assessment of our lives reveals that we are not yet fully accepted in society without the artificial conditions that others place upon us. The society around us is advancing and our failure to continue our march for independence would result in our steadily losing some of the ground we have gained. My fear for our organization is that our success will condition us to believe that the benchmark is based on how far we have come rather than on where we can go. My fear is that we will get comfortable, we will fail to face the fear that comes from testing the limits, and we will settle for second best.

When I was seven and sat at the window contemplating my future, I was afraid of the life questions that did not have answers. The fear was not related to blindness but to the uncertainties and struggles that come with the human experience. I am now thirty-nine and even though I better understand how to confront fear, certain things remain true. The emotion is uncomfortable, the uncertainty pushes me toward feeling powerless, and my hardwired instinct is to run. But I have found there is value in that fear, and the opportunity comes in the chance to stay to face the fear and reveal its other side. The other side of fear is power, and the truth of our power generates hope. When I face the fear of what we might be in the future, I think about a gathering of Federationists like we share here tonight. The thought fills me with hope, energy, and love, and I am in awe of what we will do together. For seventy-six years we have continued to raise expectations for the blind. We have diminished the false limits that the conditioned fear of blindness have artificially placed upon us. Despite my fear that we might get comfortable and the many opportunities for our power to be displaced by complacence, we demonstrate only forward progress at an increasing pace. We have not settled for second best, and we will never be conditioned to do so. We have faced our own fears, and we will never give control of our lives to others. Although we have fears, they do not come from blindness but from the power of our desire to complete our march to first-class status. Although we have challenges, they do not come from within us, and they are no match for the love, hope, and determination that keep us together in the National Federation of the Blind. We will not be defined by the prevent-blindness researchers and their agenda to expand the conditioned fear of blindness. We will not be defined by the unfounded safety concerns of others who do not know the real, lived experience of blind people. We will not be defined by the marketing experts who seek to trigger the fear response in order to sell products that create obstacles between blind people and our dreams.

My brothers and my sisters, we are the masters of our own future. The power to make change and to cultivate hope is within each of us. We bond together in the National Federation of the Blind to face the uncertainty of the future, to challenge ourselves to expand the horizons, and to take ownership of living the lives we want. Society’s fears of blindness will not stop us. Facing our own fears will make us stronger. And the power of our unwavering love, hope, and determination will lead us through uncertainty to new heights. Let us break down the conditioned fears of others. Let us challenge ourselves to conquer the fears that stand in our way. Let us overwhelm fear with our unstoppable engine of hope. Let us build the National Federation of the Blind.

[National Federation of the Blind](https://www.nfb.org/)