

Courage

"I don't fear going to prison. I don't fear loss of freedom to move about. I don't even fear death. The fear that fills me is not having lived hard enough, deep enough and sweet enough with whatever gifts God has given me."

Sister Carol Gilbert to supporters at her 2003 Federal Sentencing Hearing

In October of 2002, as the U.S. raced toward war with Iraq, three Dominican nuns, Jackie Hudson, Ardeth Platte and Carol Gilbert, entered a Colorado missile silo site to stage a peaceful protest against the impending war and our own nuclear weapons policies. They were soon arrested by military police and then charged in federal court with damaging government property and obstruction of the national defense. Following their convictions they received sentences ranging from 30 to 41 months in federal prison. They've since been released and, although mostly out of the news these days, their story survives in "Conviction," an inspirational documentary about their protest and ensuing legal battle. As an unexpected bonus, the film features the former leader of the National Association of Evangelicals and recent media sensation, Ted Haggard, who appears throughout to criticize the nuns and their actions while explaining how *his* church fits with war "like hand in glove." Of course, at the time of filming, no one knew what the future held for him. All unintentional humor aside, "Conviction" remains a beautifully filmed and powerful account of three inspiring women and their unmitigated courage.

Watching a true story of three elderly women, who had been jailed before, bravely choosing prison over abandoning their beliefs puts the idea of high stakes into a new perspective. And even though we may dwell a few rungs down on the risk ladder, competitive pool demands a certain measure of courage from its participants, a fact that's rarely discussed, probably owing to the absence of any physical threats in a typical pool match. But we all know those fearful feelings that take hold of us occasionally and, instead of trying to ignore them and hoping they will go away, we'd do better to confront them and ask ourselves why we're afraid.

The biggest reason that we avoid talking maturely about fear and how to handle it is that when we find ourselves under its control, we tend to feel alone, as if nobody else in the world would be afraid in a pool match. So, maybe because something so silly seems too embarrassing to admit, we keep it to ourselves. With some recent league experience under my belt now, I commonly see that phenomenon among lower-ranked players, who may assume that better players are never afraid, especially after facing a few who might have dominated them with swaggering confidence. While the freedom to freewheel against a weaker opponent can provide a welcome break from the usual struggle, all players experience fear at certain levels of competition. And discussions about it occur more openly among higher-ranked players.

To strengthen our courage and our ability to summon it when needed most, we should begin with an effort to distinguish our fears as precisely as possible. What *are* we afraid of? The answer will vary from one player to the next and will change for the same player depending on the situation. For example, the most seasoned tournament player can be crippled by the fear of letting others down in a team event, a specific pressure that we

don't experience during individual events. Even among the best pros, team pressure can weigh very heavily, a fact often adduced during the Mosconi Cup. It's one thing to blow a shot and ruin one's own chances, but the prospect of being the one to end the tournament for the whole team can be unbearable. Since pool is essentially an individual sport, that unique pressure tends to push harder on players who have less experience dealing with it.

Whether competing alone or with a team, most of us share a lot of the same fears. Chief among them is the fear of looking bad, an embarrassment we tend to dread worse than losing. We've all heard players say that they don't mind losing to someone who played well but hate it when they had chances to win and dogged it. Personally, having deeply hated many losses to opponents who played very well, I'm not so sure about that statement's veracity, though I do apprehend the sentiment. Still, we definitely fear playing badly, or worse, playing stupidly, especially when better players are watching. Sometimes people tell me that it makes them nervous to play while I'm watching. I like to remind them that nobody knows pool's woes better than an experienced player, and chances are they won't live long enough to miss as many shots as I have.

The key to overcoming fear in order to perform better lies in our ability to acknowledge its existence and prepare for it. Since its eventual presence is virtually guaranteed, we can manage it more effectively by anticipating it. Planning for fear in advance allows us to study it with calm, rational thinking, one of the first faculties we lose when panic sets in. If we spend some time thinking about fear calmly beforehand, we can distinguish the precise fears that we're likely to encounter and how to address them. From there we can find a method for managing the situation.

Then, in the arena, we must trust ourselves. In self trust we find the courage to take risks, and the courage to perform in front of others with confidence in the decisions we make and our ability to execute them. Sometimes I find myself at mass just before a big tournament, praying for success. Though I let it be known that I would not oppose a little intervention on my behalf, that's not what I request. Instead, knowing how fear can destroy a performance, I pray only for the courage to be myself. I like that person and, when he's fully present, I like what he can do. When I do find that courage, an uncommon ease rules the performance, and success feels weirdly familiar.

With compassion so sadly absent from the political landscape these days, we're forced to look elsewhere for leadership. Inspiration can still be found, but tends to turn up in unexpected places, like a film about three elderly nuns who sacrificed their own freedom in an effort to make the world better for all of us. Their story is the most moving I've seen in a long time and, since "Conviction" has no general release yet, I suggest going to www.ztsp.org to learn more about the sisters and maybe order a copy of the film. And, grandiose as it seems to compare our endeavor to the struggle of three true heroines, seeing them can inspire us to put our own challenges into a saner perspective to meet them from now on more courageously.

