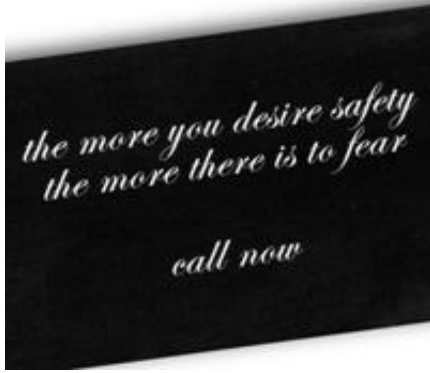


Confess your fears, toll-free

BY DAVID DINNELL



While it's not terribly unusual to find a business card with an 800 number in waiting rooms, bus terminals or at payphones, it may be to find one offering a chance to express one's deepest fear.

For the past couple of years, Chicago-based artist Deborah Stratman's *FEAR* project has been offering callers the possibility of catharsis, the unburdening of a confession.

Stratman has been conducting a random survey by recording messages left by hundreds of callers who find the number in various locations countrywide. Her simple business card reads: "The more you desire safety the more there is to fear ... call now." The card's flipside offers the toll-free number. Call it, and a mellifluous voice intones:

"You have reached the Fear Hotline. At the tone, please describe what you are most afraid of. If you need time to think about what you are most afraid of, please hang up, think about it and call back."

Stratman started the project for a Chicago gallery sound-art exhibition, with a phone number confined to the Chicago area. Pleased with the results, she expanded the project with a nationwide number. Stratman thought it revealing that out of the several hundreds who've called so far, there hasn't been a single person who's commented on fear of terrorists or economic fears. She says most of the messages express a fear of loneliness, and fears of being unloved or not being able to love.

"I found it heartening that we are a nation full of people afraid to be alone," she says. "I felt encouraged by that. It was something simple and humane and not something more theological, political or structural — all the things we seem to be so primed to fear by media, journalism and politicians. There is such a frenzy of stoking fears and manipulating people by fear that when it comes down to it, those aren't necessarily the things that people are afraid of."

Stratman's *FEAR* project continues. Calls can be made anytime, toll-free, at 1-800-585-1078. Stratman will also be presenting a program of her film work at the Detroit Film Center on Dec. 3. For more info, visit detroitfilm.org.