

## ***Should I Worry?***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
October 23, 2016  
Rev. Paul Beckel

*Why is life speeded up so? Why are things so terribly, unbearably precious that you can't enjoy them but can only wait breathless in dread of their going?*

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

*One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of shore for a very long time.*

Andre Gide

*To this day, God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or for worse.*

G.C. Jung

### **WELCOME**

We gather today hoping to bring peace into our lives, and stillness to our hearts. For we each bring with us a certain amount of worry. And that's ok.

I will not suggest that we leave all of our worries behind today. But maybe we can set them to the side--just for a bit--so we can take a good look at them. Who knows? We may even decide to take some of them home with us.

### **LIGHTING THE CHALICE**

*Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

### **GATHERING SONG** *Now Let Us Sing* #368

#### **RE MINUTE / CHILDREN'S FOCUS**      *Moonbear's Dream*      Frank Asch

Summary: A kangaroo escapes from the zoo. Moonbear and Little Bird are so startled when they see a kangaroo hop across their yard that they are convinced they must be dreaming. So why not make it a great dream? They make a big mess in the house, and eat their winter food supplies because they know that, when they wake up, all will be back in order. While they go out for a dream swim in the pond, the kangaroo goes into their house, and that's where the zookeeper finds her. The chagrined zookeeper cleans everything up and replaces the eaten honey and birdseed. When Moonbear and Little Bird return home, they decide to pinch themselves and wake up, so they won't have to see the mess. When they go inside, everything is as it was (except the winter food, of course).

Comment: This isn't a story promoting irresponsibility or carelessness, but about grace. It simply demonstrates how oblivious we are to all of the unearned benefits of our lives. But of course the lack of winter food says something too.

## MILESTONES

### RESPONSIVE READING "Let me Die Laughing" by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

We are all dying, our lives always moving toward completion.

*We need to learn to live with death, and to understand that death is not the worst of all events.*

We need to fear not death, but life –

Empty lives, Loveless lives,

Lives that do not build upon the gifts that each of us have been given, Lives that are like living deaths,

*Lives which we never take the time to savor and appreciate,*

*Lives in which we never pause to breathe deeply.*

What we need to fear is not death, but squandering the lives we have been miraculously given.

*So let me die laughing, savoring one of life's crazy moments. Let me die holding the hand of one I love, and recalling that I tried to love and was loved in return.*

Let me die remembering that life has been good,

and that I did what I could.

*But today, just remind me that I am dying*

*so that I can live, savor, and love with all my heart.*

### PHOENIX ENSEMBLE

*Locus Iste*

### MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

### MESSAGE

As human beings evolved, it was once adaptive to eat, and eat, and eat. The likelihood of anyone surviving and passing along their genes was much higher for those inclined to take in as many calories as possible. That's *not* so helpful *now* for the many of us who have access to an unlimited supply of sugar and fat.

It was also adaptive, at one time, to seek out information. This may be part of humans coming to dominate all the other species: we were slow and thin skinned, but somehow we developed the capacity and the inclination to take in, analyze, and respond to vast amounts of information.

Well, we used to think that a vast amount of information was what we could put on an 8 inch floppy disk. Now we can carry 10,000 times that much information in our pockets, not to mention the essentially unlimited amount of information available to us online. And since we've been wired to take in as much as possible, to never miss an opportunity to receive, analyze, and respond to new information, it's terrible to even think about missing out on something that might be crucial to our survival (or another "like" on Facebook).

But it seems we can get too much of a good thing. Too many calories, too many tweets and texts and pokes and emails and instagrams. It's worrisome. But then not getting all this may feel worrisome as well.

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When Jane and I lived in Chicago, many cars in our neighborhood had burglar alarms. The alarms would go off frequently, and continue, it seemed, forever. They were often tripped by fire trucks barreling down the narrow streets shaking the cars tightly packed on either side, setting off alarms all the way down the line.

Sometimes, I imagine, car alarms were set off by genuine car thieves. But no one paid any attention.

Worry can be like this. Worry is our internal alarm system. Like a car alarm, worry can be set off by relevant triggers, and irrelevant triggers. And sometimes, worry can be like the alarm that just won't shut off, and it becomes debilitating.

Excessive worry diminishes our ability to live fully and freely. It can prevent us from fulfilling our purpose in life--or even finding our purpose in life. It can keep us from enjoying the blessings we have...and the people we love.

We who worry are usually aware of our worrying; and would often like to stop. But telling someone to stop worrying doesn't help. We need to learn HOW to stop.

Worry is a practical-and-spiritual problem open to practical-and-spiritual remedies—including acceptance, self-awareness, and doing the right thing.

So the trick is not to eliminate worry from our lives, but to learn to worry well: at the right time; in the right way; and to the right degree.

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Just as we need blood pressure, we need worry, just not too much. And like blood pressure, worry is controllable: through diet, exercise, stress-reduction, meditation, or medication.

Worry arises from fear, which is a normal, healthy response to danger or possible future danger. Anxiety becomes pathological when this natural response is disproportionate to the real likelihood of danger, or when it continues without cause, or keeps us from relaxing, or, in severe forms, keeps us from functioning.

Panic Disorder, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder are diseases that will affect one in four of us some time in our lives (though they often go undiagnosed).

Could everyone sitting along the aisle raise their hand for a moment? This can give us some idea of how many of us will deal with severe anxiety. I also asked this arbitrary group to raise their hands to demonstrate that those who worry excessively are selected arbitrarily. It's neither those who have the most to worry about, nor those who are morally weak and unable to toughen-up in the face of life's troubles.

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Still, worry is a good thing. We appreciate people who worry enough to do their jobs well, to get to appointments on time, to vote, and to take care of their hygiene. Sometimes the worry that enables us to do these things can be distressing, but it's not necessarily dangerous.

Worry is a good thing. Again, it's possible that we worry so much because it conveyed an evolutionary advantage to our ancestors: those who were intensely alert and wary were probably more likely to survive in the days of the saber tooth tiger.

And physical risk is not the only thing to worry about. Social and emotional risk probably make us just as worried because not fitting in, and not having friends, has been, for much of our evolutionary history, a death sentence.

Worry is a good thing—it's a very advanced form of brain activity. It takes a smart person to think of all the things that can go wrong...and take steps to prevent them.

Worry can be a healthy process that enables us to achieve our goals. So worry can lead to happiness.

People who don't worry are more likely to be blindsided by problems. And they are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors.

Worry can simply mean caring. What parent doesn't worry about their child? How can we say that that is a bad thing?

So worry is good...in moderation. But sometimes we are afraid not to worry. Sometimes we fear that if we ever stop worrying then the world will collapse around us. So we think we can never let our guard down. Even if we have consistently performed well in the past, we may remain anxious about next time.

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So our inherited ability to worry may have been more useful eons ago than it is now.

It's possible that we are keyed-up for danger now even when danger is not around. It's possible that we create stress for ourselves just to balance out the expectation of stress.

And it's not just genetic. We may be on-guard today because of real trauma that we have experienced in the past...experiences that maybe, if we could look at them rationally, we would recognize that they are unlikely to happen again.

People between 20 and 40 years old are (on average) at the height of their lives' anxiety. Maybe this is because of the pressures of family and getting established in careers. Maybe it's due to a fear of failure...or ambivalence about what success in life even means.

We can hardly say though that we face the kind of day-to-day dangers that even our grandparents faced from simple bacterial infections, farm and factory accidents, or childbirth. But today we can worry about things on a larger scale, with climate change and weapons of mass destruction. And with 24 hour news feeds, an ugly surprise can pop up at any moment.

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I try only to worry about those things over which I have some control. But, I have little or no control over my kids, and I worry about them anyway. I assume that I always will.

It's hard not to feel responsible. There are so many ways of preventing problems today that one can worry that if anything goes wrong—then it was avoidable...and it was my own fault.

I'm actually pretty good at letting go of those things over which I know I have no control. But regarding those things I imagine I do have some control over—I sometimes obsess unproductively.

I'll say that again: even if I'm pretty good about letting go of those things over which I *know* I have no control, I can still be overwhelmed by those things over which I *imagine* I have some control.

And when I am in doubt about my abilities, when I feel overwhelmed, and with winter coming on, I tend to multiply my worries by procrastinating. Consciously, I tell myself that I have nothing to worry about—"I can file my taxes easily enough at the last minute." But really: my refusal to worry (my denial) can be just another form of worry.

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I grew up very happy-go-lucky in a thinly populated rural setting. I scoffed at people who locked their cars.

Even when I was betrayed, deeply and repeatedly, by a close friend, I simply denied the obvious and patted myself on the back for turning the other cheek. Turning the other cheek is good. But denial is not always good. Paying attention is better. My turning the other cheek wasn't even that meaningful because I was so drugged by denial that I didn't feel the sting in the first place.

By continuing to REFUSE to worry, I suspect, I became increasingly vulnerable, and in need of harder and harder slaps for me to learn that sometimes I'd better worry.

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When I first thought of preaching about worry, I wasn't thinking that it would apply much to me.

But the more I read on the topic, the more worried I became. Procrastination and denial are forms of worry? Oh no!

So here are some tips for dealing with worry, offered as strategies that I too will strive to put into practice:

1. Journaling. Journaling can be a way to exacerbate ugly obsessions if all we do is just write write write what we're upset about. On the other hand, journaling done well—in which we describe both the events of our lives and how we feel about them (not one without the other) ... this can help us reflect calmly and rationally upon the past and the present and find new ways to face the future.
2. Another way to get our thoughts out of our heads is to talk. But talk to a good listener. Don't tell your worries to someone who is going to tell you how to solve them...or someone who is going to tell you not to worry...or someone who is going to tell you how stupid you are. Don't set yourself up for more anxiety by talking to a bad listener.
3. If you know that you're going to worry about certain kinds of situations or events, be prepared. Have a party, go to a movie, make a point to help someone out just when you know the worry is going to unfold.
4. Excessive worry is a product of an overactive imagination. But we can use our imaginations for our benefit as well. One woman was irrationally anxious about opening her email—always fearing that it would contain something awful. She was aware that this was an irrational fear based upon something that had occurred long ago. But she was unable to shake her anxiety until she decided to give it a name. She named it Hugo, and decided that it looked like a toad. Now, before opening her email box, she always shoos Hugo away. And she feels silly, but she doesn't feel preemptively upset.
5. Once we're aware that there is good and bad worry, which kind we are doing is often obvious. And we can learn to disengage from the bad kind, we can cut it off as soon as it begins. How? Jump up and down. Take a shower. Walk the dog. Brush your teeth. Call a friend. By distracting ourselves for just a short period we can interrupt what might become hours or days of worry.
6. Go out of your way to see the good things in life. Sing, laugh, and dance. Again, it's better to feel silly...and out of step with a cynical world, than to be dragged down in despair.
7. Connect. Connect with people...with the sacred, or nature. Connect with ideas, principles, or traditions that move you. Connect with institutions that support your values.

8. Prevent problems. We can easily spend more time worrying about something than correcting it or preventing it from happening in the first place. So in the short-term, getting organized can create some anxiety, but in the long term, and in moderation, it can help us to relax.

Of course “moderation” is different for different people. You may think that this is a little neurotic, but my kids and I used to sort our Legos into boxes of 9 distinct categories. So when we wanted to find just the right piece, we could find it! Now 10 organizational categories would have been the right number for some folks, and seven for others. Everybody’s got to find their own balance. But I like to stop at 9. so here’s number nine:

#9. Even though it’s important to organize and analyze, it’s also important to stop talking, thinking, and writing and get on with our lives.

We need to turn our worry into action. And if we can’t do that, then we may need to seek professional help. And that’s ok too.

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Spiritually, worry is a paradox. The remedies I have suggested deal largely with gaining control over our lives and ourselves so that we can stop worrying. But the spirit suggests instead that we let go of control!

Acceptance: whether you call it trust in God, or Buddhist non-attachment, *acceptance* is the spiritual key to managing worry.

So I propose we can do both: seek self control, *and* self awareness, AND seek the understanding that we are not in control.

Living without excessive worry means accepting that life is unfair and unpredictable; that death is inevitable; and that we live here in limbo all the days of our lives.

If we experience this limbo from a perspective of fear, then we never live. If we resist or deny it then we suffer all the more.

And along the way, we can pray. And perhaps the simplest, most humble and worry-free of prayers we could say each day:

In the morning: whatever.

In the evening: oh well.

Amen: so it is.

## **CHOIR**

*Quiet Holy Grace*

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

## **SENDING SONG**

*For All that is Our Life #128*

## **BENEDICTION**

Life is unpredictable and unfair; death is inevitable; and we live here in limbo all the days of our lives. With serenity, accepting the things we cannot change, with courage, changing the things we can, and with wisdom to know the difference...we now go in peace.

## **CIRCLE ‘ROUND**