

# Keep Calm and Carry On

Clay Nelson © 6 December 2015

Sometimes the beginning of a sermon has an unlikely beginning. At the Living Wage Office where I work three mornings a week, in the break room there is a sign with a familiar look. It is red with a white crown at the top. Underneath it says “Keep Calm. Fill the dishwasher, not the sink.” It made me think about the original sign of which it is a parody, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” We see it everywhere these days affixed to signs, greeting cards, tea towels, coffee mugs, and the like. Over my morning tea I wondered where it came from and why. You probably know but I had to Google it to find out that the phrase was first used in a propaganda poster printed in 1939 by the British government, which explains the crown at the top.

In the lead up to the war the Ministry of Information printed 2.5 million copies of this poster as well as two others. Each was a different colour, but all had King George VI’s crown affixed to the top. The first said, “Freedom is in peril. Defend it with all your might.” The second was less intense: “Your courage, your cheerfulness, your resolution, will bring us victory.” These two were posted all over England in shop windows, on buses, notice boards and hoardings. “Keep Calm and Carry On” was never used. Its purpose was to reassure the populace if Germany ever invaded the country, as expected. After the war in 1945 most were reduced to pulp.

In 2000, a bookseller discovered one of the remaining posters in a box of old books bought at auction. He put it up over the cash register in his bookshop. Pretty soon, customers were asking about where they could buy a similar poster, and the shop's owners decided to print copies and that was the beginning of the craze.

In his book *Stuff Brits Like* Fraser McAlpine gives his theory as to why it is so popular with the English:

There is something quintessential in the way the posters do not say “Don't Panic” or “We Will Prevail”... They say “Keep Calm,” and what that means is, “We may be suffering something of an invasion at the moment, but that's no reason to start acting in a rash and hot-headed manner. We may be a subjugated nation — temporarily — but we are not about to start acting like savages.”

And what of the “Carry On?”... As a nation, we have been trained to look past the bad behaviour of our rudest guests, especially the uninvited ones, and rather than cause a scene, we shall just go about our daily business as if nothing has happened.

I think its popularity is much broader. You don't have to have a stiff upper lip to find the message appealing. It touches us all, for it is good advice for living through turbulent times: the terror attacks in Paris and elsewhere, the latest mass killing in California, the increasing number of indications that climate change is threatening our continuing existence on the planet not just some time in the distant future, but now, and if that wasn't enough, there is ISIS. But if you stop to think about it every generation lives through turbulent times. The Brits had the Blitz, but Kiwis of different generations have faced the Land Wars, the influenza epidemic, the huge loss

of life at Gallipoli, fear of Japanese invasion, the Springbok Tour, Bastion Point, the overnight imposition of neoliberal economic ideas by Roger Douglas, the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior, are just a few examples that quickly come to mind.

In America, my parents lived in fear of another Great Depression and Eugene McCarthy's witch-hunt. When I was in school we were taught to get under our desks if there was a nuclear attack and we had drills reminding us regularly of the imminent threat of our annihilation. The Cuban Missile Crisis had the nation on tenterhooks for thirteen days in October 1962. And of course, there was the morning of September 11 when I turned on the Today Show, where I got my news before the Internet. The newsreaders were focused on live video images of a fire in the top floors of the World Trade Center and conjecturing about what the cause was. While I was watching I saw what we now know was the second plane fly into the other tower. My first response? Keep calm and carry on my ass!

The response to that event has changed the world more in my lifetime than the event itself. The response is straight out of our ancient lizard brain: fight or flight induced by fear. It has created an even greater mess in the Middle East than thought possible, and now that mess like a deadly virus has spread throughout the world as far away as Paris and the latest shootings in San Bernardino. That in turn has put the vast majority of Muslims, who have no tolerance for extremists, under ever-greater threat. This is especially true for those who are seeking to escape war and terror in their homeland. Sometimes it seems as if no one is keeping calm and carrying on.

In my former life I would be preaching this Sunday on an Advent theme. The season of Advent includes the four Sundays before Christmas. To prepare to hear the message of "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all" on Christmas Day, Christians during Advent hear about the end of the world. They are hearing words Jesus never said about the destruction of the Temple and how he would rebuild it in three days. We know he didn't say it because the Temple wouldn't be destroyed until almost four decades after he died during the Jewish Wars. But early Christians lived in turbulent times and they needed hope in the face of cruel oppression by the Romans. They found that hope in Jesus. They expected him to return within their lifetime, as an instrument of divine justice, to finish what they thought the Messiah was supposed to do. They were disappointed. Later generations would have to re-evaluate these unrealistic expectations, but that is how early Christians tried to keep calm and carry on. Today there are plenty of people, not just Christians, who have unrealistic expectations that they put their hopes in. Like those who think bombing the enemy is a means to peace or denying Muslim refugees sanctuary will protect them from life's turbulence.

Several millennia before Jesus a story was told of a time when the Hebrew people lived in turbulent times that offered a more realistic approach to our fears. They were slaves in Egypt living under harsh conditions. The story tells of a confrontation between the Hebrew god Yahweh and Pharaoh. Yahweh finally convinced Pharaoh after a series of plagues to let Moses lead his people out of Egypt. After they left in haste Pharaoh changed his mind and went after them only to have his army drowned in the Red Sea. At first the people rejoiced at their good fortune. When the cheering stopped they looked around and saw they were lost in a desolate wilderness. They started whinging that starving was worse than being a slave. Clearly, it was not easy to escape turbulent times even then.

The story goes on to say Yahweh provided manna. No one is quite sure what it was but if there is any truth to the story, it surely was provided from nature and not from heaven. It apparently couldn't be gathered up and stored. Its use by date was apparently one day. We assume that at some point the Hebrews learned to live off the land. In other words, they learned to keep calm and carry on. How?

Well, it wasn't because God, after leading them into the desert, called them together and told them, "Hey, this is how I'm going to take care of you." God was silent. The waters of the Red Sea closed and there was nothing but four decades of desert life ahead.

They found themselves in the desert with nothing beyond what they could carry and they didn't have centuries of field craft knowledge in how to survive there. It was a strange new world they were in. They would have had to gather what wisdom the elders had, learn from any indigenous people they encountered, and figure the rest out by trial and error.

They were worried. If we were in that position we'd be worried too. Oh yeah, we are in that position today. We have never faced an enemy quite like ISIS before.

Worry is an emotion about anticipated negative events. It is rooted in fear. It's what you feel when you realize there may be challenges ahead, and you that you do not have the skills to meet them. Worry comes when you feel inadequate to deal with what might come.

Some things we worry about one can fix. You can learn new skills. You can take precautions. If you are worried about a car accident you can check the tyres and make sure you put on seat belts. There is something you can do.

But an awful lot of things we worry about we can't do anything to fix. We are all going to die. We all get sick. Bad things happen to good people. The world isn't fair, and on and on. There is little we can do to prepare for them and at some point they will overwhelm us and we will die. None of us gets out of this alive.

We have two choices, we can "Keep Calm and Carry On" or we can over-focus on our worry and keep it firmly planted in our minds. That's toxic worry. We fill our heads with thoughts about things we can't do anything about.

Toxic worry is usually much worse than what we are worried about. Winston Churchill is said to have quipped "I've had lots of worries in my day, mostly about things that never happened. Therefore, obviously, worrying helps." That's funny because it is so obviously wrong. Worrying about things doesn't change things, it just changes our brains and not in a good way.

Dr Herbert Benson in his book *The Relaxation Response* calls this sort of worry the "hidden plague." Stress related illnesses are epidemic in our society. Our mental health is fragile, antidepressants outsell aspirin, and everywhere we see signs of people cracking under the strain. We are worrying ourselves into sickness with an over-focus on things we cannot control.

That is a mistake. If you fill your mind with fear-based worry, it takes over. The human nervous system can process only one impulse at a time. Only one. Let me show you.

Cross one leg over the other. Rotate your foot in a clockwise direction. Now, with your finger write the number zero in the air. Keep your foot moving clockwise and now with your finger write out the number six. Is your foot still moving clockwise? No?

Your foot changed its clockwise direction because your hand started moving in a counter clockwise direction. As you were focused on the hand, the foot automatically shifted too. The human nervous system can entertain only one impulse at a time.

That's true of the part of your nervous system called your brain too. It can process one idea at a time. If you experience worry and do nothing about it, that impulse--worry--takes up the channel and it is all your mind can focus on.

You can do it intermittently, and most of us do. We're worried, then we think about something else, then we worry again, then we do something else, then we worry. All the spaces in our mind that might have been used for creative thinking, imagination, problem solving are taken up by the mental constipation we inflict upon ourselves.

The way out is to do what the Israelites did. Perhaps through a vision of some sort, Moses realises that there is food in the desert if you know how to look for it, and he then shows the Israelites how to gather and prepare it.

The downside is we can't save up the manna for a rainy day. We have enough for today and have to trust that there will be more tomorrow. We can't hoard it because we are worried about tomorrow. We have to live as if tomorrow will be okay by remembering the world didn't end yesterday. We are here today. That is what our hope is based on. We figured out how to carry on yesterday and we will again today. We may not be sure how, but if we are not consumed by our fears, if we stay calm, we can with some grace, with some help from each other figure it out. If each of us chooses to work at it, the world will be a little less turbulent. So eat your manna, there will be more tomorrow.