



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

I can't breathe

Clay Nelson © 16 August 2020

Years ago, in a very different world than this one, I had a poster in my office of a care-free panda happily munching bamboo. The caption on it read, "Who says worrying doesn't help? Nothing I ever worried about ever happened."

After over one hundred days of no recorded community transmission we are once again in lockdown. I'm not sure, but could the reason be we had stopped worrying or at least not worrying enough? No need to worry about physical distancing. No need to sing happy birthday throughout the day as we washed our hands repeatedly. No need to get swabbed if we had symptoms. We had beaten the virus even as it surged all around us. "No worries" we believed collectively. Life is back to pre-pandemic normal — whatever that was. Our worries had taken a holiday cruise down da Nile in spite of constant warnings from Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield that we weren't out of the woods yet. We might not have been worrying, but he certainly was. Now we have joined him. Watching his daily one o'clock media briefing is once again must watch TV viewing.

Like George Floyd with a policeman's knee crushing his neck, Covid has made it hard to breathe, literally for those who are infected and metaphorically for the rest of us who have suddenly remembered how to worry.

These recent developments made me wonder about the purpose of worry in human evolution. Apparently worry is the brain's fault. Our brains evolved into their present form about 250,000 years ago. They worked fine until about 500 years ago.

If we saw a lion in the distance, we ran. If thunder rumbled we found a cave. If we were thirsty we looked for water. Our ancestors lived in what scientists call an immediate-return environment because their actions instantly delivered clear and immediate outcomes. Now we live in a delayed-return environment. Most of the choices we make today will not benefit us immediately. If we do a good job at work today, we'll get a pay cheque in a few weeks. If we save money now, we'll have enough for retirement later. Many aspects of modern society are designed to delay rewards until some point in the future.

This is true of our problems as well. Many of the problems humans worry about are problems of the future. Those are the problems most likely to cause panic attacks, making it difficult to breathe.

Our brains were designed for an immediate-return environment, not a delayed-return one. They don't cope well with change and uncertainty. We are walking around with Palaeolithic hardware badly in need of an upgrade.

It turns out that the old brain is fit for purpose to make sure we keep social distance, practice proper hygiene, get tested if symptoms arise and listen to Ashley instead of conspiracy theorists. It is not as helpful when we focus on how long we will be in our bubbles or how we will pay our bills. Our brains become consumed by all the "what ifs" the virus has spawned.

Robert Rosen, a psychologist and Unitarian Universalist, defines the issue as how much anxiety we have.

"A healthy level of anxiety — just enough anxiety — is the exact amount you need to respond to danger, tackle a tough problem, or take a leap of faith. It boosts your confidence and ability to concentrate, enhances your ability to learn, strengthens your commitment, and increases your energy. It enables you to perform at your best.

"But not all anxiety is healthy. Anxiety becomes unhealthy when it interferes with normal functioning or good judgment. Instead of spurring you on to action, it shuts you down or sends you off frantically in all directions. Left unattended, unhealthy anxiety can lead to serious physical or psychological illnesses.

"Too much anxiety comes from negative thinking and emotions, such as fear of inadequacy, failure, insignificance, or being taken advantage of. It causes us to control or attack uncertainty and to ease the pain we feel. Too much anxiety creates discomfort, tension, and frustration, and creates chaotic energy.

"Too little anxiety, on the other hand, is the face of complacency. It comes from the belief that all is well, and an unfounded expectation that good times will continue unabated, with no need for change or improvement. Too little anxiety leads to passivity, boredom, and stagnation."

Later Rosen describes his epiphany:

"I turned 50 atop a mountain in Angkor Wat, Cambodia. Embraced by the natural beauty of the rain forests and awed by the man-made beauty of the Hindu and Buddhist temples, I sat reading Comfortable with Uncertainty by Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun who lives in Nova Scotia, Canada. Her words spoke to me in the silence. Instead of trying to 'control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe,' I should 'learn how to relax in the midst of chaos.'

"Chödrön's words had a profound effect on me. Whether it was because of the location or the timing — or both — I took to heart the importance of learning to see uncertainty and change as part of life, while believing in my ability to manage it."

Rosen offers us ten tips for living with change, uncertainty, and just the right amount of anxiety in his book *Just Enough Anxiety*:

- Be fully present in each moment
- Distinguish what you can and can't control
- Be willing to embrace the unknown
- Befriend your anxiety
- Cultivate self-confidence
- Learn to manage your emotions
- Look for the positive in every experience
- Focus on your personal goal
- Keep the bigger picture in mind
- Practice patience and persistence

Being present in each moment keeps us from overly worrying about the future. Instead, use your anxiety in the present moment to impact the future.

In the Buddhist tale of the Timid Rabbit, the rabbit became anxious over something he imagined was happening. He didn't consider all the facts. He jumped to conclusions and then spread his anxiety among the other animals. Not until the wise lion made the rabbit examine the situation, did the rabbit let go of its anxiety. All the other animals caught up in rabbit's anxiety blamed rabbit, and never examined their own emotional reactivity.

Rabbit might have been less reactive if it had followed Rosen's ten tips. And if we follow them, we'll actually change our brains, enabling our emotional responses to be tempered by our more rational minds. This becomes easier over time because repetition rewires our brains. Call it spiritual practice or behavioural modification, we can learn to react differently to the challenges of the world.

All it may take to upgrade our prehistoric operating system is taking time to focus on breathing.

Breakout

What is your biggest worry?

How anxious is it making you?

How are you controlling or managing it?