



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The importance of napping to spiritual health

Clay Nelson © 15 May 2022

If we go far enough in the future, historians may label the present time as the Age of Anxiety. There is certainly enough anxiety floating about for everyone to build a raft. The possible outcomes in Ukraine weigh on us all. Climate change is occurring faster than projected as sea levels and sea water temperatures rise. Poverty due to wealth inequality is creating social instability. Authoritarianism is rearing its head in unexpected places, endangering our freedoms. And then there is Covid. It is on the rise again in its increasing number of variants in the UK, France, US, South Africa, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Ashley Bloomfield this week announced that models for New Zealand suggest that the number of new cases, hospitalisations and deaths are not expected to go much lower than they are now in the near future and are likely to increase significantly during our winter months. We all know people who have been infected, a growing number of whom are members of this congregation. I learned of two more yesterday. We know going back to a pre-pandemic normal isn't going to happen. So, what is the new normal going to look like and who in the hell knows?

One of the symptoms of living in the age of anxiety is the loss of playfulness as we lie down to be steamrolled by seriousness. Remembering my recent sermon on playfulness, I guess my musings are not all that random. Sometimes they even tie together, at least loosely.

In an effort to lighten the mood I found myself remembering, "What? Me worry?". It is Alfred E Neuman's tagline from one of my favourite magazines in my teen years, *Mad Magazine*. I discovered on Google that there is a cottage industry of creating memes for Neuman's tagline. Before getting down to the serious business of coping with anxiety, I thought a few samples might be in order:

"I get anxiety because I think there is something wrong with my anxiety when I hear about someone else's anxiety and I don't have that type."

"When your anxiety goes away and having no anxiety makes you anxious."

“Have you ever been chilling, minding your own business and realise your jaw has been tightly clenched for the past 15 years?”

Anxiety is a natural reaction to stress, but scientists, psychologists and medical researchers have identified so many possible factors — from brain chemistry to genetics, life experiences to even racism that could account for our reactions — that I went to some philosophical and spiritual descriptions I find more helpful:

- *Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.* ~Søren Kierkegaard
- *Every time you are tempted to react in the same old way, ask if you want to be a prisoner of the past or a pioneer of the future.* ~Deepak Chopra
- *Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.* ~Arthur Roche
- *Anxiety's like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you very far.* ~Jodi Picoult

As a side note, anxiety doesn't always have to be bad if it isn't chronic. Sometimes danger is clear and present, and anxiety helps us to determine how best to respond. If a tsunami is coming, don't go to the beach.

Psychologist Robert Rosen emphasises that anxiety indicates we care about something, we're engaged with life. He writes in his book *Just Enough Anxiety*, “[Anxiety] grabs your attention, and, if you're willing and able to examine what you're feeling and why, it moves you toward optimal performance and the deeper truths in your life.”

Rosen offers ten tips for living with change and uncertainty:

- 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

- Practise patience and persistence

Apparently, we need a Goldilocks amount of anxiety, not too much and not too little. Just the right amount to keep safe.

There is another aspect of anxiety of which we need to be aware: too much is spiritually contagious. Family systems and organisational systems have a lot in common. Anxiety can be highly destructive as it spreads like a virus within a family or organisation. From my experience, I know it is true in religious organisations. Edwin Friedman's book *Generation to Generation*, which offers ways not to be infected, has helped me survive forty years in ministry.

The capacity of members of the clergy to contain their own anxiety regarding congregational discord, both those not related to them, as well as those where they become the identified focus, may be the most significant capability in their arsenal. Such a capacity enables religious leaders to be more clear-headed about solutions... Friedman calls it being a "Nonanxious presence" or as Rachel and I refer to it after a challenging day at work, taking a nap.

A "nonanxious presence" is an individual who provides a calm, cool, focused and collected environment that empowers others to be relaxed. This can be especially helpful for those who have varying levels of anxiety, are in crisis or find change traumatising. By being a nonanxious presence, we can model emotional regulation and invite others to see that there is more than the anxiety or other feelings they may be experiencing.

My goal is to empower every member of this organisation to nap. It is conducive to the organisation's and individuals' spiritual health. It isn't an easy thing to do.

I haven't always been that calm and authentic presence I'd like to be. I've been in that anxious place, trying to be something that I thought others wanted me to be. More times than I want to remember in my ministry, I've lost myself as I've absorbed the anxiety of the moment and the people around me. This has resulted in pretending, defending, posturing, and reacting. I eventually realised, "I am who I am," and it's not worth trying to anxiously react to pressure.

Better to know what's important to me and what's not important to me. To understand what defines my values so that I can regulate my reactions to

other people. Ideally I seek to separate myself from other people's opinions, expectations and anxieties while remaining connected. Remaining connected requires giving permission by inviting disagreement and encouraging dialogue.

It is not only my internal struggles that undermine my efforts to nap, external pressure can sabotage my best efforts as well. According to Friedman, napping requires taking primary responsibility for our own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism. If we can achieve this, there is more than a reasonable chance that the body will follow. There may be initial resistance but, if we can stay the course and stay in touch with the resisters, others will usually go along.

When you articulate your vision, you are taking responsibility for your own goals and self. But you must do it while maintaining an emotional connection, especially with those who resist, or you are asking for trouble. The resisters will get more anxious, will find ways to obstruct what you are trying to accomplish and will make leading difficult, if not impossible.

To explain the effect of the nonanxious presence — including the problem of resistance — Friedman uses the metaphor of General Chuck Yeager and the sound barrier.

When test pilots came close to breaking the sound barrier, the aircraft would experience more and more turbulence. Pilots would drive their aircraft to what they thought was the limit and then, afraid that the airplane would shake apart, back off without breaking the barrier. Yeager believed a physicist friend that it would be smooth on the other side of the barrier. He chose to speed up just when most pilots were backing off making him the first to break the sound barrier.

Seeking to become a nonanxious presence is a spiritual exercise that, once mastered, will help us cope in healthy ways in these turbulent times. May achieving it allow us to find the goldilocks level of anxiety, a place where we can go to make sound decisions without succumbing to rigidity. Maybe it is even a place we can take life a little less seriously. So go ahead: take a nap.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

What is your current level of anxiety, and how are you controlling or managing it?