

The Opposite of Worry  
April 15, 2018  
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Thank you, CD, for sharing with us your stories and your music. Here at First Parish, it's important that we hear from more perspectives, and sometimes we do that through a service that one of you leads, and sometimes we do that in other ways, like sharing our stories here as part of a service. So thank you CD, for sharing what only you can share with us this morning.

*How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*  
*The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You*  
*The Worry Trick: How Your Brain Tricks You into Expecting the Worst and What You Can Do About It?*

These are all titles of books I've consulting while thinking about the subject of worrying. And I don't just mean in preparation for the service today. I mean because I worry. A lot.

The truth is, we all worry, and we've all wanted to stop, like CD tried to do during her Lenten practice. CD shared powerful reflection with us this morning, about an impossible goal, but one that is universal. I mean, who among us has not tried to stop worrying.

Dale Carnegie, author of the famous book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* wrote another book that was printed in 1948 titled *How To Stop Worrying and Start Living*. And when I was a worrisome teenager, I found this book lying around my house (worrying does have a genetic component you might say) and I read it in my own quest to "stop worrying and start living" myself.

The first suggestion in the book, and the one I really remember to this day, was that the thing that you can do to stop worrying is to imagine the worst possible thing that could happen, and then become ok with that. Carnegie claimed, that, usually, the worst thing that can happen isn't really all that bad.

And, in a sense, sometimes, this is true right? If you say something accidentally offensive to someone, the worst thing that will happen is that they will be offended by you. If you fall on your face walking up to a podium to give a presentation, the worst thing that will happen is that people will laugh at you. It's easy to see how one could get to a place of being ok with whatever the worst outcome is, when the worst outcome is laughter or someone being offended by you.

But what are you supposed to do when the worst outcome, the worst possible thing that can happen is something that you are not, and will never be, ok with. And you shouldn't be ok with. As MLK said "There are some things in which we ought to be maladjusted."

If you are worried about your father dying, is it truly possible for you to become "Ok" with his death and then stop worrying about it?

If you have a friend that is homeless and you worry about what that might mean for her and for her quality of life, is it possible, is it good, to become “ok” with that reality so that you stop worrying about it?

And what about the realities of what our country bombing Syria might mean? Is it possible to become “ok” with the potential loss of life, the threat of war, in an already devastating humanitarian crises?

What if the worst possible thing that could happen really is awful, really is terrible? What if the worst possible thing that could happen, does happen?

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Many of you know that in January my partner Amy’s father John took his own life. He did it while I was standing right her at this pulpit, giving a sermon about the #metoo movement, one in which I spoke of how I was more worried about that sermon than any other one I had given yet that year, because I was worried about how you might respond, what feedback I might get, whether or not I was doing the right thing by addressing this complicated, but important issue.

And yet, how my world shifted when, standing in the church office, I got the call where Amy’s mother delivered the news.

And since that moment, a particular kind of worry has been on my mind. If we - if I - had just worried a little more about John, and a little less about my sermon (for example), maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Maybe I could have done something and he wouldn’t be dead.

Expect, of course, that’s not how this works. If you’ve ever lost someone to suicide, you know that’s not how this works.

But that’s how our brains want it to work. We somehow think that if we worry enough we can prevent that terrible thing from happening, right? And we all have worries about terrible things happening

The worries about the death of our parents.

The worries about the death of our children.

The worries about whether or not we will keep our jobs and support our families.

The worries about the state of the world, the threat of war, and the loss of life.

The worries about our own health, our own inevitable deaths.

The worries about the loss of abilities or functioning we used to have.

And the list goes on, right? And in some little way, we all can’t escape the feeling that if we worried *just* a little more maybe we can prevent these things from happening.

And of course we all know that's not true.

But it's also not true that becoming "ok" with the realities of these is a reasonable option.

We can accept that they might happen, that they will happen, but we can't become perfectly "ok" that they will. And that's a fundamental difference.

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One of the things I love about this church is that we have a moment to share with each other, during our joys and concern portion, about what is happening in our lives, which means that, more often than not, we share with each other our worry.

I've heard you say things like "please, my friend is undergoing surgery next week, keep him in your thoughts," "please, my loved one is starting a family, keep them in your prayers," and "please, I'm struggling right now with this illness, hold me in your heart."

These are requests for prayers.

And we do this because of something we believe, deeply theological, about prayer.

Yes, I said prayer and then I dared to make a statement that we all believe something the same about it. Which is a rather bold claim to make in a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

But the thing that we believe about, about prayer, is that in sharing our burdens, in sharing that another was on our hearts and on our minds, is worthwhile in and of itself. In literally sharing these thoughts and prayers with an about each other, we know that we cannot take away each other's burdens, but we can help them be held more lightly.

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Prayer, of course, particularly the use of the word, is controversial in our church and in our North American society.

Andrew WK, who is a musician most popular for his 2001 hit "Party Hard" (Side note: Does anyone else remember him or this song? It featured such profound lyrics as "So let's get a party going, let's get a party going, now it's time to party and we'll always party hard." Anyone? Ok, that's not important)

Anyhow, this musician, Andrew WK, also had a surprising insightful advice column in the Village Voice from 2014-2015 called "Ask Answer WK", because all of us have complex identities, right? You can write the song "Party Hard" and still be deeply insightful.

In this advice column he got the following question from a reader:

“Hey, Andrew.

Thanks for doing what you do and helping people. I’m going to make this short and to the point. My older brother was diagnosed with cancer last week. My whole family is freaking out and trying to deal with the news. Everyone is trying to find different ways to help, but something my grandmother said has really got me angry. She said we should all just “pray for my brother,” like prayer would actually save his life. Just thinking about it now makes my fists clench with frustration. We need to actively help my brother and do actual things to save him, not kneeling on the ground and mumbling superstitious nonsense. I got into a fight with my grandmother and the rest of my family about this and now I feel worse than ever. I need to get them to see that praying and religious mumbo jumbo doesn’t help. How do I explain this to them?

*Thanks for reading this,*

*Not Gonna Pray”*

So Andrew WK responds:

“Dear Not Gonna Pray,

I’m deeply sorry to hear about your brother’s diagnosis. I’m sending you my thoughts, and my heart goes out to your brother and your whole family. Guess what? That was me praying for you. I think the idea of “praying” is a lot less complicated, a lot more powerful, and a little different than you may realize. In fact, I’ll bet you’re already praying all the time and just don’t realize it.

Prayer is a type of thought. It’s a lot like meditation — a type of very concentrated mental focus with passionate emotion directed towards a concept or situation, or the lack thereof. But there’s a special X-factor ingredient that makes “prayer” different than meditation or other types of thought. That X-factor is humility. This is the most seemingly contradictory aspect of prayer and what many people dislike about the feeling of praying. “Getting down on your knees” is not about lowering your power or being a weakling, it’s about showing respect for the size and grandeur of what we call existence — it’s about being humble in the presence of the vastness of life, space, and sensation, and acknowledging our extremely limited understanding of what it all really means.”

He goes on to talk about how humility is hard for us because it forces us to realize that we actually are helpless, that we actually don’t know all that we think we do about the world and where we are going. The fact that prayer is in unknowing, in not knowing, or perhaps, in realizing that there is nothing else we can do but to think of someone, to send out love to them, to hope for the best for them.

But it's not just about that for us here, is it? For us we pray and we share with each other because we can help our burdens be carried more lightly.

So let's not get hung up on the word, but agree that the sharing of our feeling, our thoughts for each other is a powerful thing even if it only changes the pray-er, that is the one who offers the prayer.

So if prayer is concentrating our thoughts deeply on something, or someone, we love, and, frankly, so is worry, how does that make prayer the opposite of worry?

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When CD sent me her original description of what she wanted to say and how prayer is the opposite of worry, I loved the phrasing, but found myself skeptical as I delved into what that meant.

But then it hit me. Worry is the illusion that if we think enough about something we can change it. Prayer is the realization that we cannot.

Worry is deep concentrated thought on something, thinking that you can change the outcome.

Prayer is deep concentrated thought on something, knowing that you cannot.

As Andrew WK says, prayer is humility, it is releasing control, in a way. It is saying to our God, the universe, or perhaps only to ourselves what we hope to be true. But it is giving up our control of the situation.

We know that prayers are not enough to change the world. And that shouldn't be the purpose of prayer. Prayer can be the beginning of action, or it can be the reality that no more action can be taken. It's intentional. It knows what it wants. It is directive. Prayer does not absolve us from action, but rather realized that our actions are all we have control over and that sometimes that's not enough.

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In the Christian tradition, the practice of Lent is to give something up in order to get closer to God, a form of prayer in and of itself, in the service of self-denial.

If you practice or remember, Lent is the forty days before Easter, which this year landed on Valentine's day. The same day we saw on the news the parents standing outside that school in Parkland Florida, worried, anxious, terrified. You can't tell them to be ok with

the worst case scenario, because the worst case scenario is the death of their child. A parent's greatest worry, ultimately, right?

I'm sure some of those parents who lost children are wondering if they worried more, if their child would still be alive. It's a haunting then.

But we know that in this world, beautiful and terrible things will happen. And though we can worry and do what we can to make a difference, like change a gun law, or work for suicide awareness, the truth is that sometimes all we can do is pray. All we can do is surrender to this mystery of life that we do not know all the answers, but that our love and our hope must still be expressed. And so we do that in prayer.

In fact, even Dale Carnegie, author of "How to Stop Worrying and Start Living" says that Prayer is the perfect way to conquer worry. And while I don't believe it is possible to "conquer worry," perhaps he wasn't such a fool after all.

And so, my friends, as the worries of the world, the reality of our attacks in Syria, the threats to our democracy, along with the worries in our own lives, impact us and are inescapable, let us find ways to give up the illusion that it's all on us. Let us find ways to pray, to share with each other, to realize that we are but a small piece in this beautiful mystery of life, and that whatever we may believe, we are not able to worry ourselves out of pain, out of the inevitable difficulties of life. And so, if that is so, let us find comfort in sharing our suffering with each other, and with that which we consider holy.

And let us say together amen. Amen.