

What?? Me Worry?? Sunday, October 4, 2015

Readings: *Matthew 6: 25-34; I Worried* by Mary Oliver

A colleague read Mary Oliver's poem in the opening worship of our UU clergy gathering last week, and we all, recognizing ourselves, laughed and asked for copies. We all worry – about the world, about our churches, about the people we are connected to, and about our own lives. Do you worry too? Of course – would you be human if you didn't?

Worry is as ancient as humanity. In the story of Adam and Eve, it comes in with the apple and the snake – once Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they worry about the consequences of their action, they worry about not having any clothes, they worry about where their next meal would come from, and soon they have children to worry about too. And still we worry.

Rabbi Sandy Sasso adds a twist to this story by imagining Adam and Eve worrying even before they ate the apple. She pictures them worrying when the sun begins to set at the end of their first day of life in the Garden of Eden. They didn't know this would happen. They panic. They try to stop the sun from sinking lower: Adam offers to have the sun rest on his shoulders. Eve tries to cheer it up (literally) with a song. When the sun continues to sink, they try ordering it to stay in the sky. When that doesn't work, they get scared and take their fear out on each other: they blame each other for causing the sun to go away. Then they start thinking about what the loss of light could mean for the plants and the animals. As they start thinking about the needs of others, they remember that they are not alone in the Garden. They ask God for help: "God, Creator of the Great Light, do not let your world grow dark. Help us bring back the sun. Make morning again." Calmer now, they remember that they have flints and figure out how to use them; they make a fire and eventually fall asleep in front of it. When they wake up in the morning, they rejoice in the reappearance of the light "wrapped around them like a robe of gold." Now they bless the sun and realize that they can bless the night as well.

Sandy Sasso wrote this book to help children deal with their worries after September 11th but I think her story has a message beyond children and beyond September 11th. It offers us a model for how to deal with all the worries of our lives:

- First: don't worry ahead of time. Adam and Eve didn't anticipate the sun setting – they started worrying when the sun began to set. So often I at least waste my energy – and my sleep – worrying about things that may never come to pass.
- Second: do what you can to address the situation. Maybe offering a shoulder or a song might have kept the sun from sinking – it didn't hurt to try.
- Third: when you can't solve the problem yourself, remember that you are not alone. Ask for help.

- Fourth: Remember that you are not in control of the universe. Rest in the power of Love. It may not stop the bad thing from happening, but it will calm you and give you courage to face the darkness.
- Fifth: When the new day dawns, rejoice – and recognize that it rose out of the darkness.

Doesn't it all sound easy when I lay it out like that! But of course, it's not so easy. Otherwise centuries after the story of Adam and Eve, Jesus and the Buddha and Rumi wouldn't have been telling people not to worry, and still centuries later we wouldn't be spending so much energy worrying.

So really, how can faith help us ease our worries and our fears? The turning point comes when we make that shift from feeling that it all lies on our shoulders to recognizing that much is not in our control. As Mary Oliver writes, "Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing/and gave it up." Or as Jesus said, "Can worry make you live longer?" Or as a Buddhist proverb puts it: "If you have a problem that can be fixed, then there is no use in worrying. If you have a problem that cannot be fixed, then there is no use in worrying."

But more than its uselessness and the stress it causes, worrying sets wrong priorities for our lives. Worrying boxes us into our own little universe where we are god. Worrying assumes that we control our destiny. And much as we like to think that we have control, we are not in control much of the time. We can't control our eyesight or our hearing or the changing cells of our bodies; we can't individually control the tides or the moon or the sun; we can't control gunmen who invade our schools, bombs which fall on hospitals, or planes which crash into buildings. We do not run this universe.

When we stop worrying, stop feeling that we are responsible and in charge, we are freed to work with others to make change, to help those in need, and to take the joy which comes. This shift in attitude comes often after a crisis of some kind – after all your eating right and exercising you still got cancer; after all your reminders to wear your bike helmet and look both ways before crossing the street, your child was at the wrong place at the wrong time; after doing everything you could to hold onto your job – working late nights and on weekends, canceling family plans, you still lost it. After the worst happens and life goes on, you see that worrying made you no safer. As Ann Romney said in a recent interview, reflecting on her diagnosis with MS, "You know something? I am not afraid of anything anymore. Nothing intimidates me."

This isn't just a "don't sweat the small stuff" lesson, but a shift in the way we view the world. In the passage where Jesus says, "Don't worry about what you will eat or what you will wear," he's trying to get people to think about what's really important and to orient their lives toward what really matters. Jesus calls what really matters "the kingdom of God." We might call it "the realm of love and justice," but whatever our language, living with that perspective points us to meaning beyond our own individual lives. Yes, we need food and yes, we need clothing and shelter, and yes, we want good health and safety for ourselves and those we love,

but Life with a capital L is about the health and joy of all people not just ourselves and those we love. When we are able to look with that wider perspective we are freed from selfishness and freed for selflessness. As Adam and Eve moved from fear and anger to caring for the needs of the animals, and so opened themselves to a power larger than themselves, so does letting go of worry and fear enable us to focus our energies on what really matters.

It doesn't have to take a crisis to bring us to this perspective. Spiritual practice can bring us there too. In a spiritual practice, whether it is meditation, prayer, tai chi, yoga, or whatever brings your mind to stillness, we are taken out of our daily concerns and connected to that Deep Peace which is at the heart of all life. The more and more we connect to that Peace, the more it reorients our thoughts and our actions to what really matters.

Some people seem to do this more easily than others. Nobel prize winner Malala Yousafzai did not let cultural norms in Afghanistan stop her from going to school, didn't let the Taliban's threats stop her from speaking out on the necessity for education for girls, and didn't let their attempt to assassinate her silence her. Her vision of a world equal for all conquered her worries for her own safety. And now she is trying to get others to share the wideness of her vision. Speaking at the UN last week she told its members, "Your dreams were too small. Your achievements are too small. Now it is time that you dream bigger." And she explained to journalist Nicholas Kristof, "No world leader would want nine years of education for their children. Every world leader wants quality education for their children. They need to think of the rest of the world's children as their own children."

Freeing ourselves from worry allows us to have this wideness of vision. When we stop trying to protect just ourselves, when we stop worrying about how we compare with others, when we stop worrying about what others will think, we are freed to think, to act, and to live bigger. We are freed for fullness of life.

It's not easy to take these steps. So I have three suggestions for us to work on in this new church year:

First, if you're not already doing it, I invite you to make time for a daily spiritual practice. It could be as simple as sitting in silence for 5 minutes each morning, or reading in a meditation manual or spiritual book, subscribing to an on-line spiritual reading and reading with no outside distractions the reading that shows up in your in-box each day; or doing a series of sun salutations or a flow of tai chi. Sit and knit without the TV or radio on, focusing on your stitches and your breath.

Second: rather than letting go of worry about your whole life, let's start with a component of our lives – the one we share. Let's let go of worry about the church this year. Whether it's finances, the condition of the building, questions of leadership, or whether someone liked or appreciated what you did, let's not worry about it. Let's focus on what really matters: our feeding ourselves spiritually and working together to feed others in all the ways open to us.

And third: use the time and energy opened to you to spread joy. Take your "body ... out into the morning" to sing. Come to church and sing. Attend the conference on economic justice at the UU Church in Braintree at the end of the month and see

what we can do to make a difference. Cook a meal for someone. Join the men's ministry in helping others with home projects. Sort clothes for Cradles to Crayons, Haley House, or Rosie's Place. Even just smile and say "hello" or "thank you" to someone who looks sad. Next June, let's check in and see how letting go of some worry has changed you.

For the gardens will grow, the rivers will flow in the right direction, the earth will turn; and freed from worry, we will grow and flow and turn too. Let's now go out into this morning singing.

- Pamela M. Barz

Readings

Matthew 6:25-34 (CEV)

²⁵ I tell you not to worry about your life. Don't worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life more than food or clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds in the sky! They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them. Aren't you worth more than birds?

²⁷ Can worry make you live longer?²⁸ Why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow. They don't work hard to make their clothes. ²⁹ But I tell you that Solomon with all his wealth wasn't as well clothed as one of them. ³⁰ God gives such beauty to everything that grows in the fields, even though it is here today and thrown into a fire tomorrow. He will surely do even more for you! Why do you have such little faith?

³¹ Don't worry and ask yourselves, "Will we have anything to eat? Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?" ³² Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all of these. ³³ But more than anything else, put God's work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.

³⁴ Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You have enough to worry about today.

I Worried by Mary Oliver

"I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn as it was taught, and if not how shall

I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.”