

“Living in Anxious Times”
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Some time ago, I was invited on a river rafting trip down the Thompson River. I had watched the Thompson from the safety of its shores many times, but it was just a little bit different, screaming our way down the river in a flexible – and flippable – inflatable raft. (I am not kidding about the screaming part.)

Each set of rapids would look okay from a distance – our guide was teaching us how to pick the good channel – but as the rocks and waves got closer, and the shore sped by faster and faster, I could feel the power of all that water catching our little raft in its grip, pushing us one moment and pulling us the next. We had some influence on our course, but our choices were limited – a little to the right, or a little to the left was possible, but heading straight for shore and jumping out was not an option.

The waters of life move at their own pace, with their own logic. Unlike the mighty Thompson, which has some level predictability, we cannot know what the next bend in the river of life will bring: a rock, a whirlpool, or slow, calm stretches are all possible.

At this particular time in the life of our planet and our country, it seems that uncertainty looms large. About a month ago, knowing that I would be preparing for a sermon on ‘living in anxious times’, I started making a note of those headlines that seemed to encourage anxiety. I stopped this practice after a couple of days: it was making me anxious.

Stories about chemicals leeching out of plastics, stories about the global economy: these are large scale issues, seemingly outside of my control, yet they have the potential to impact my life and the lives of those I love. What will be the end results of the disaster of unregulated financial markets--will we end up with a better system? How will the changes affect people who are living on investments or pensions? What about the collapsing car manufacture industry? Yes, I have been wanting better, more environmentally sound alternatives to cars. But I cannot help but think of all the people who would be affected by plant closures.

I hear the uncertainties present in our community, and I hear them in our fellowship. Change is happening – either too fast, or not enough. How will the markets affect us, and our dreams? How do we change the way we’ve been doing things, so that new people feel welcome, and a few key people aren’t doing a backbreaking amount of work?

What happens when a whole bunch of energy gets funnelled into a new social action project – what about the building, and all the other things – perhaps unglamorous – that still need to get done?

Uncertainty abounds, and when uncertainty is present, anxiety is in the air. And anxiety is contagious.

Any type of fear is picked up quickly by those around us. I was camping with a group of friends a few summers ago at a provincial park. It had been a long weekend and we had all been able to stay on past the end of the weekend. It was Monday night – all the other camping groups had left between noon and four. Suddenly, in the late summer evening when the darkness was complete and all we could see was the fire and the roundness of each other's faces, one or two of us became aware that there were animal sounds nearby, and that we were alone in the park. Hair rose on the back of my neck and within moments we had all picked up on that feeling as our minds and bodies responded sympathetically to each other. Even those who didn't normally get spooked in the outdoors caught it.

The frights that happen as a result of a noise or a shadow or a direct threat are in some ways much easier to deal with. The body responds with a limited number of options, and the mind analyzes the threat – do we respond to the alarm bell, or do we recognize that it is a false alarm this time, and stand down?

Anxiety, however, is different from fright. Fright can be traced to an identifiable threat – it may or may not be a real threat, but it is usually possible to figure out cause and effect.

Anxiety is more diffuse. There is usually more than one cause, and often we don't notice the beginnings. There isn't one clearly ringing alarm. It's like a whole series of soft chimes being rung at different locations in different patterns, again and again, gradually getting louder. We can't turn to pinpoint one source of the noise, and we aren't sure when it began.

Most mornings before I start work I sit at my desk for a moment of prayer. But before I do that, I make a sort of confession – not a confession in the sense of a list of things done wrong, to beat myself up about, but a confession of what I bring with me as I sit down at my desk. It could be a laundry list of things to do that is rolling around in my head. It could be something that happened yesterday that stuck in my mind. Whatever is there, gnawing at the edge of my consciousness, I write it down just to see it on the page in front of me, outside my head.

Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies, author of our responsive reading, [earlier in the service] preached in Washington D.C. in the 1950's. He was particularly interested in the

insights of the (relatively) new field of psychology and what it could do to help us live freer lives. Of anxiety, he said that the first thing one must do is face the “realities”, or at least, whatever facts there are. [A. Powell Davies “Can Anxiety be Mastered? (All Souls’ Church Unitarian, Washington, DC January 29, 1950) www.dmuuc.org/Davies/AnxietyMastered.html]

If I am being honest with myself, I will admit that life is inherently uncertain, that the things I claim to “have” are subject to all sorts of contingencies. As Davies said “there is nothing that we call our own which may not at any time be lost.” [Same sermon as above] There are other realities too: the realities of our personalities, of our physical bodies, of our families and friends, and our life experiences.

Focusing on the realities helps to bring us into the present. Anxiety is like worry, in that is usually connected to concerns about the future, the unknown. We do not know what will happen with the economy, or the planet. We don’t know if we will be able to respond and make changes in time. The jury is out and anxiety is in.

In addition to focusing on realities, Davies suggests that we need to focus on the possibilities. I know, we are a group of people who speak of liking our questions rather than our answers. As the hymn says, “even to question, truly is an answer.” [Singing the Living Tradition #354 We Laugh, We Cry by Shelley Jackson Denham]

Lifting up possibilities is neither questioning nor answering. Or perhaps, it is a very particular type of questioning. When we ask “what is working well here?” or “what is our greatest success?” we are looking for possibilities in the existing situation. It takes careful observation, and a practiced eye.

I heard a story about a woman who carried gold stars in her pocket. And anytime she saw a random stranger helping someone else at the grocery store, or on the street or in the movie theatre she would run up to them and give them a gold star.

One of the most moving “gold star” experiences for me, recently, was Barack Obama’s speech on November 4th, when he became President-elect of the United States. It brought tears to my eyes, tears that continued to fall as I watched television crews capture strangers hugging and celebrating each other, and people falling down in the street, weeping for joy at something they had barely dared to hope for.

Obama released something powerful that night: hope. He gave great examples of his country’s ability to change and grow, reminding the whole nation of what they had achieved at their best, and the possibility of what they could do again. He didn’t say it would be easy, he said it was possible, it was necessary. He offered his belief in this people, and they responded as if they hadn’t been able to believe in themselves in a long time.

This speech, Obama's election, and the public response have been compared to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's First Inaugural speech in March of 1933, when he said to a country in desperate straits "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself".

Both men, in their speeches, helped to break the spell of fear and despair. Both men had a strong sense of a larger vision for their people. For that is the biggest problem with anxiety: it is like a spell; we are stuck inside ourselves and need to be brought out, back to the place where our care is for our neighbours as much as ourselves.

One of the counter-intuitive things about anxiety is that what sometimes appears as the "way out" – the release from anxiety and discomfort – may not be.

When I am in the midst of a fear caused by uncertainty, I am physically uncomfortable and I find myself grabbing quickly for the nearest security. The river raft lurches and immediately my hand shoots out to grasp the handle beside me. I don't even have to think about it. In this situation, this is a useful response: I don't have a couple of seconds to decide where to hang on; I'd much rather have several thousand years of instinct take over, thank you very much.

This quick response isn't so helpful when the threat isn't immediate, when my concern is a worry about the future, when there is a problem to be solved rather than a threat to be countered. Then my quick words are more likely to be hurtful rather than helpful, and the speed of my response just raises the anxiety level.

When it comes to anxiety, especially in groups of people, reflex action is not helpful.

Facilitators sometimes call this place of anxious discomfort the 'groan zone'. Any time a team, group, committee or task force sets out to discuss a problem, the first part of the discussion often seems to raise more problems. As people add their own perspectives, the issue gets wider, more complex. Often, there will come a moment when the group tolerance for what feels like division reaches a breaking point. The role of the facilitator is to help the group realize that they are in the "groan zone" – the point of greatest divergence – and that it is ok, even a good thing, to be able to tolerate this place. The biggest danger a group is in at this point, is in shutting down debate by settling for a quick or partial solution. [Sam Kaner, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (Gabriola: New Society Publishers, 1998).]

As any facilitator knows, it doesn't need to be the facilitator who breaks the spell of the instinctual response – in fact, it is just as likely to be a group member, for we all have this capacity. It is why there were two people in our children's story, and not one. One person alone can easily lose perspective, but if you have two people, or even better, a community of people – then it is more likely that someone will break the spell of instinct by cracking a joke or drawing our attention to the deeper issues.

If this is to work, if we are to learn to sit comfortably in the 'groan zone' and stay relaxed in the face of uncertainty, we need to have trust: trust that together we will muddle through; trust that our own efforts will contribute in some way to the greater whole.

Mystics know that trust is an important part of the spiritual life. The feeling of the absence of god or the absence of faith or belief is just as spiritually significant as the most spectacular epiphany complete with dazzling lights and music (perhaps even more so.)

Julian of Norwich, fourteenth-century English mystic, and incidentally, the first woman known to have written a book in the English language, is famous for her statement that "...All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"

It is important here to note that Julian lived in England at the time of the plague, the Black Death. She was not wearing rose coloured glasses when she said "All shall be well". Nor was she ignoring realities of life or her own situation. Rather she was expressing a trust in the possibilities, in her case what she knew as divine love.

The good news – and there is good news! – the good news is that anxiety is not the only behaviour that is contagious. Laughter is contagious too. And so is courage.

Real belief is not about the denial of facts. Real belief accepts what is happening AND looks carefully for the green grass growing up at the edges. Real belief knows that part of trusting that all will be well is looking out for the wellness, remembering the moments of courage and sharing them with each other. Real belief is about recognizing and nurturing the possibilities by handing out gold stars. Obama had a vision, but he also had one of the best organized campaigns seen in a long time.

We each have a role to play in helping our communities ignore the wizard whispering in the wind [a reference to the morning's children's story]. As we settle our minds on the realities, as we put our energy into the possibilities that emerge, and our hope and trust into our vision for the future, we too will, from time to time, in our own human and fallible way, share in the message of Julian of Norwich, that "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Amen, blessed be.