

When Worry Loosens Its Grip

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 10, 2026

Let us begin with an old favorite. Long ago, there lived an elderly Chinese farmer. Every day, the farmer and her daughter labored on their small farm with their only remaining horse. One day, the daughter left the stable unlocked, and the horse escaped. When the neighbors heard the news, they lamented the tragedy: “Will you be able to maintain the farm?” The farmer simply responded, “Maybe yes, maybe no.” The next day, the horse returned accompanied by six wild horses. “How wonderful!” the townspeople applauded. Your farm will flourish. Again, the farmer simply responded, “Maybe yes, maybe no.” The following day, the daughter was thrown from one of the horses. She landed on a pile of rocks and broke her leg. “What a tragedy!” the neighbors exclaimed. Now your daughter cannot help you farm! The farmer replied, again, “Maybe yes, maybe no.” The next day, the Imperial Chinese Army arrived to recruit the young people of the town into a looming battle. However, because of her broken leg, the daughter was left behind in the village. When the neighbors heard this, they said, “How wonderful! Her life was certainly saved.” To this, the farmer responded, “Maybe yes, maybe no.”¹

One lesson among many is this: we find ourselves worrying because we rush to judgment far too quickly. We hear bad news and immediately imagine a future filled with sorrow. “This is terrible — now what?” We allow ourselves to be guided by anxiety. Yet this morning, we heard several examples in which hardship ultimately led, not to anyone’s detriment, but to joy and good fortune. We worry because we assume we already know the outcome, but life often turns in unexpected ways.

How many of our anxieties ever truly come to fruition? How much time do we spend ruminating on things that are ultimately irrelevant? So much of it is irrational, and yet, even knowing this, we still find ourselves drawn into worry. Note—today’s reflection is not universal. Some of us worry far more than others and will therefore encounter these reflections in a more

¹ “The Story of the Chinese Farmer” by Dr. Christopher Kaczor

personal way. Yet worry is still pervasive. My hope is that each of you can find at least one or two examples that resonate with your own life and carry those lessons with you.

Worry can often create a facade of usefulness. We worry and ruminate as though this might make a tangible difference in what lies ahead. It serves a purpose, we believe. But can anything truly be changed by projecting anxiety? Very rarely does it alter outcomes in a positive way. More often, it generates emotions that work against our well-being, leading to deep harm. Ultimately, worry can make the future worse. Not only do we become consumed by it, but we project it outward as well, setting off spirals of deepening anxiety in others. Worry can radiate in harmful, unnecessary ways. A quote widely attributed to author, professor, and motivational speaker Leo Buscaglia offers, “Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow; it only saps today of its joy.”

A Swedish proverb offers, “Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow.” When small things are met with anxiety, they become painfully imminent and are given far more control than is realistic or healthy. A minor misstep in traffic. A moment of frustration with a partner. A comment that, in hindsight, was not quite accurate. A look that could have been misinterpreted. Each simple and often unavoidable, but each becoming, to some, overwhelming. Think of a time you may have apologized to someone who didn’t even remember what you were referring to. What is small grows larger and larger in the mind, to our disadvantage.

Worry leads us to mentally reside in a future that has not yet arrived. We fear it, lament it, and anticipate sorrow, embarrassment, or shame. I will fail my midterm and thus get kicked out of school. I will give a presentation and make a fool of myself. I will forget the lines in my play and get laughed at. Yet more often than not, when the future we so desperately feared does come to pass, it is manageable—far less detrimental than we had imagined. In situations like this, our attention becomes fixed on potential difficulties as we lose sight of what else surrounds us. Everything else—important or not important, good or bad, life-giving or life-taking—falls to the wayside under the weight of a single focus. This narrowing of attention stretches worries far

beyond what is realistic. Goodness and joy fade into the background, while worry expands and takes the lead.

Worry often arises when we seek control amidst uncertainty. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus offered this wisdom: focus on what you can control and accept what you cannot. Similar sentiments echo through twelve-step groups to this day: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Wisdom spoken in ancient Greece nearly two thousand years ago still resonates today. So, what can we control? We can control our response to adversity. We can choose what we will tolerate and what we must leave behind. We can discern whom we trust and whom we hold at a distance. But we cannot control how others respond to us. We cannot control our friend’s behavior. We cannot control the state of the world itself. All we can do is pause, allow life to unfold, and remember that while we cannot control everything that happens to us, we can still choose how we respond. We cannot rid ourselves of worry, but we can learn to find peace in the midst of uncertainty.

What about the worries that carry over from one day to the next? One mistake can journey closely within us, with yesterday’s errors draining us of today’s joy. My seminary friends observed how I could fall into this pattern to my own detriment – always ruminating on what I had done wrong. Was my question irrelevant? Should I have invited so-and-so out to lunch? As a deterrent to this tendency, they presented me with a magnet that holds a prominent place on my fridge to this day. Each morning, when I open the fridge for my creamer, I see Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words: “Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”² It is not simply about forgetting yesterday, but about intentionally closing the door on that which only serves to cause unnecessary pain. Every day we will blunder, he reminds us. These missteps are inevitable—acknowledge them, then release them. It is neither productive nor healthy to dwell on what we feel we have done wrong. Instead, begin each day in such high

² “Considerations by the Way.” By Ralph Waldo Emerson

spirits that yesterday's worries are cast to the wayside, making space for peace and serenity rather than anxiety and lament. Mistakes can be named, held briefly, and then set down. Dwelling gives rise to worry, and worry, in turn, works against us.

So what can help heal this pervasive worry that so many of us live with? Rev. Sara Goodman offers that the opposite of worry is, perhaps counterintuitively, not calm. Neither is it confidence. The opposite of worry and anxiety is curiosity. Curiosity—a shift in perspective. Our projections move from “What if this goes wrong?” to “What if this goes right?” From “Oh no—what is going to happen?” to “Oh wow—I wonder what will happen.”³ Fear softens into wonder, anxiety into hope, and lamentation into openness. We begin to reframe what lies ahead, not as something to brace against, but as something to meet with a sense of possibility.

I think the question applicable to both is “what if?”—a form of curiosity in either direction: the “what ifs” of worry versus the “what ifs” of possibility. The contrast is stark. “What if I go visit my family and we get into a heated argument about politics?” versus “What if my family gathers in warmth, sharing genuine love, compassion, and joy?” “What if I make a mistake and am rejected?” versus “What if I don't get it quite right, but am met with kindness and a helping hand?” “What if I go to the party feeling alone and out of place?” versus “What if I go to the party and make some fun new friends?” Do you see how one path drains life from us while the other restores it?

Rev. Goodman further writes about the temptation we face in imagining what lies ahead. We may look to the past with a critical eye and project it onto the future—because this happened, we assume it will happen again. We might also be tempted to think that our future is set in stone, that nothing we do can change it.⁴ This is not true, for every action we take ripples outward with an inevitable certainty, shaping the world around us in ways we cannot fully foresee, echoing through space and time. Ultimately, we have no idea what will unfold in the

³ Quote from Sara Goodman offered in *Soul Matters: Awakening Curiosity*

⁴ *ibid*

days, months, and years ahead—we only have projections. So may we rest, not in worry, but in curiosity.

What can happen if things ultimately go well, even amid the hardships we each inevitably face? How might worry give way to curiosity, even in the darkest of moments, allowing us to persevere when we encounter the worst? How can we come together amidst chaos?⁵ We may imagine a looming catastrophe, yet perhaps we might also reflect on the strength we would discover if we held one another through the crisis together. We may foresee a future marked by violence, but we can also remember the peace for which prophets and peacemakers have labored throughout the ages—with courage, compassion, and great heart. Perhaps we anticipate natural disasters, yet we also know the extraordinary power of strangers helping strangers, saving one another from despair and destruction. Even in our personal lives, we may lament death, illness, and pain, yet still be reminded to cherish this one wild, precious, and fleeting life. Let us be curious about the strength that can emerge amidst chaos, the peace that can persist amidst violence, and the compassion that can arise amidst disaster.

Worry, in and of itself, can lead to emotional, psychological, and physical suffering. But what might change if we moved away from worry and toward action? If we are troubled by the injustices of this world, we can become politically engaged. We can support immigrants, peacefully protest injustice, go to the polls and vote. Perhaps remaining idle only feeds our anxiety further. Even when we cannot control the outcome of a situation—such as food insecurity in our community—we can still volunteer, serve, and care for others. If our minds are filled with lament, we can speak with a therapist or trusted companion. When panic begins to rise within us, we can breathe deeply, take a walk, or practice simple grounding exercises. We can speak honestly about how helpless we feel. When uncertainty looms like a threatening cloud, we can turn toward companionship. When worries emerge we pray, meditate, or engage in the healing presence of the natural world. We can walk in the woods, sit in silence, and

⁵ Quote from Sara Goodman offered in *Soul Matters: Awakening Curiosity*

remember that we are still here, still breathing, still connected. This, too, is a profound form of healing: allowing worry to become action, connection, and care.

Today we are invited to ground our worries and curiosities in our shared faith. We are held within a sacred mystery far greater than any catastrophe we may face—a mystery that carries and sustains us. Our faith holds us each day within a web of unconditional love, abiding compassion, and shared hope. Together, we are able to live without certainty because we trust in a greater reality that holds us— an essence, an eternal love, a forest in springtime. There is a web that binds us together in love and companionship with all that is, was, and ever will be, no matter what we face. Thus, our faith calls us to remember that though each of us suffers, none of us suffers alone. Our faith also calls us toward an enduring curiosity. What can we learn from life’s myriad and abundant mysteries? What might await us still? Together, we transform our shared worries into resilience and purpose. Each tear we shed, each question we pose, each curiosity we offer, becomes an invitation into a deeper faith and a more abiding spirituality. May we find strength and enduring love in all that is finite and infinite, sacred and profane. May we open ourselves to a holy and enduring curiosity.

So, when someone approaches us with an imminent disaster, may we respond, “Maybe yes, maybe no.” When we feel anxiety stirring within us, may we meet it with the same gentle refrain: “Maybe yes, maybe no.” For there are never certainties, only possibilities—and even possibilities may hold unexpected blessings. May we meet uncertainty with wonder and meet worry with abiding curiosity. May we carry ourselves with grace, knowing we will falter, yet trusting that we are continually called back toward wholeness. What if life is beautiful in its complexity? What if we grow stronger with each adversity we face? What if we discover love amid hardship, and hope amid despair? May we meet each day as one rich with possibility—held in a spirit of enduring curiosity, and sustained by promise, hope, and love.

May it be so, and Amen.