



Neighborhood Unitarian
Universalist Church

Surplus Anxieties

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Thank goodness for stress! I know that many of you are probably thinking, "Don't do that! Don't thank anything or anyone for stress! Stress is the bane of my existence!" But, I persist in doing so. Thank goodness for the sweaty palms, the indigestion, the nail biting, the tight necks, the tossing and turning at night, and the headaches. Don't get me wrong. Stress is not fun, but I have come to think of it like that little red button on the Thanksgiving turkey that will pop up when the bird is ready to eat. Stress is a good indicator button. It will tell us if we are feeling sketchy about a situation and need to retreat- a great tool in developing our street smarts. It will also give us superhuman strength, so they say- if your child is trapped under a car, as rising stress levels result in an increase of the release of endorphins.

But, more than this, I appreciate stress if not for any other reason than the fact that when I notice that I am stressed, usually because I notice some of the physical symptoms I mentioned before, I gain an increased awareness. I become more mindful of my life, my activity level, my obligations, my shortcomings, and my health. When I notice I am stressed, I am able to stop and take the pulse, so to speak, of all of this and make better decisions or reframe my thinking.

I haven't always had this friendly of a relationship with stress and, truth be told, as with most people I suppose, I struggle with it daily. We have a love/hate relationship, stress and I. It was fairly recently, actually, that I came to discover that I suffer from anxiety. It isn't enough to be diagnosed a disorder, and most people do not know me as a particularly nervous person, so I was resistant, at first, to facing it. I have made great strides through various forms of therapy and through reflection, but I have found that the most valuable lesson learned has been trying to make friends, a bit, with stress. Anxiety can be managed by reframing our worries, fears, and stresses and by tossing out those that do not serve us or are unnecessary.

Now, as I go along, you may notice that I will use the terms "stress", "worries", "fears", and "anxiety" somewhat interchangeably. This might not be clinically sound, from a mental health perspective, since anxiety means something quite different to a psychologist, but it would be irresponsible of me to attempt to speak in clinical terms, anyhow. There is some overlap in the common understanding of these words and it is in that general context that I will use them.

Another one of the benefits of stress is that it can be a good motivator, urging us to meet deadlines & get great things accomplished. (I am one of those expert procrastinators that swears she does her best work under pressure.) Stress can also help us to place our best foot forward, when we prepare for a job interview or get ready for a first date. It can add to our excitement as we wait in line for a roller coaster.

Acknowledging these beneficial forms of stress can make it easier to make friends with it, to a degree. But in reality, most of us lead such fast-paced lives filled with responsibilities and demands of work and family, that our experience of stress is of the more annoying variety. It comes in the same package as the excitement building, motivating variety: palms sweat, the heartbeat increases, hands may start to quiver, stomach goes crazy, the mouth goes bone dry - Sound familiar? The difference is, with the aggravating type of stress comes the anxiety that deep-seeded fear induces.

Fear is at the bottom of all of our anxieties. In fact, we spend the good majority of our lives afraid. For example, if our job stresses us out, we might fear getting laid off or fired. We may fear ending up a "failure" or maybe even a success. Many times we become anxious because of the fear of breaking relationship with others. We'll stress out about the way that our communication was received, wondering if we have hurt the feelings of someone we love. We fear not being accepted by others or not being loved. For many, above all, the most anxiety inducing fear is the fear of death. Wishing to prolong the inevitable for our loved ones and ourselves, we worry and worry about safety and health.

None of these are unfounded fears. Any anxieties caused by possible events are valid anxieties. After all, we have all either experienced or witnessed the loss of a job, a relationship ending in divorce, a broken friendship, or the disassociation of family members. We have all certainly felt rejection at one point or another in our lives. And, we have

all experienced death and illness- whether intimately or several persons removed. We know that these things do happen, so what is preventing them from happening to us and to those we love?- realistic, understandable, valid anxieties.

Why, then should stress be an indicator to slow down and gain perspective? Well, it is easy to allow our worries to snowball and become difficult to manage. I am not referring to the anxiety that can be brought on by drug or alcohol abuse or to the type that leads to panic attacks or that impede on the ability to function normally. These are all indications of larger problems and I urge anyone experiencing these types of anxieties to seek professional help.

No, I am talking about our common daily stressful lives that can leave us a bundle of nerves at the end of the day and make it difficult to unwind. How many times have you felt ruled by your stress instead of the other way around? This is why work is so often referred to as "the rat race". We can easily feel as if a twenty four hour day just isn't long enough, with all of our obligations and demands, combined with the things we enjoy doing and try to make time for. Worrying becomes the unwritten bullet point on our list of things to do and eventually goes along with each thing on the list, if we let it.

But, while many of our anxieties are justifiable, many more are unnecessary. They don't serve us. They are superfluous. It is important to remember that possible events are not always likely events. I have heard wise parents speak of child rearing with this understanding of anxiety, saying, "Of course you worry, but you cannot stop your children from experiencing the world, good and bad. There are times that you have to let go and trust them and trust that you have done what you could for them." Winston Churchill once echoed this when he said, "When I look back on all these worries I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which never happened."

I once read a story that was a great illustration of how we may carry more stress than is necessary. In the story, a teacher asks some students the weight of a glass of water. Some answered 8 ounces, some 20. The teacher replied, "The actual weight doesn't matter. What matters is how long you try to hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's easy. If I hold it for an hour, my arm will ache. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case, it remains the same actual weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." He continued, "And that's the way it is with stress management. If we carry all of our anxieties all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on." As with the glass of water, we must set down our worries, especially the unnecessary ones, sometimes temporarily, while we recover our strength, time, and emotional reserves, and sometimes permanently, when we gain an awareness that they do not serve us.

One instance in which I truly recognized the value in this practice of distinguishing between the useful & not-so-useful anxieties occurred just this spring and provided me with this sermon title of Surplus Anxieties. In April, I travelled to the east coast to be interviewed by the Regional Subcommittee on (Ministerial) Candidacy, one of the many hurdles through which we must pass on our way toward ordination. The west coast's appointments had been booked a year before, so nine months before, I was squeezed in. I was terribly nervous, so this was a chance for me to truly practice all that I have learned in managing my anxiety. I would be going before a panel of several strangers who were there to ask me personal and professional questions and whose job it was to judge me. I was given the option beforehand to bring words to read as we light the chalice and I decided that I should take them up on the offer.

So, a week before traveling, I sat down and imagined myself before them and prayed what I felt. This is the prayer that I wrote and ultimately read on the day of my interview:

May this candle be for me here like a warm hearth fire, calming all surplus anxieties and reminding me that, in this company, I am home.

Yes, may this light be the hearth fire of this committee, as its members gather round it in their wisdom and experience, offering guidance and counsel to each who sit before them today.

The flame is our hearth, our common gathering place as Unitarian Universalists. Around it our movement draws together, returning home to where we are cherished, challenged, and celebrated, and creating a home for those seeking the same.

May the warmth of its fire be ever reaching. Amen.

We began the interview and I immediately noticed a man to my right with furrowed eyebrows and an intent look on his face. He leaned in closer each time I spoke to answer a question. For a moment I was certain that he hated me. But, I caught myself and thought, perhaps this is the look he has when he is listening deeply, perhaps he doesn't hate me. Then came his turn to ask a question. He paused, eyebrows even more furrowed, and said, "My question is: Did you write that chalice lighting yourself? It was just lovely. Those words, "surplus anxieties", I've never heard it put that way before. I really liked it!"

Man, the irony! My fears about being rejected, about the financial impact a delay in ordination would bring, all of my anxieties wrapped up in my imaginings of those furrowed eyebrows were all "surplus"! They were not needed and, in fact, were not serving me!

What has the wisdom of your years taught you is worth your extended anxiety, and what is not? What are your "surplus anxieties"? Under the chair in front of you (or, on your chair, for those of you sitting in the first row), you will find two slips of paper and a pencil. (If you don't have a pencil, please share with those around you.) Together, we are going to literally and figuratively throw out our surplus anxieties. Take a moment to reflect on what worries you are able to let go of that you have been carrying around with you. Maybe you can think of one, maybe several. Maybe it will not be easily thrown out, or maybe it will. Try to challenge yourself. I invite you to jot them down on one of the sheets of paper and crumple it up really good. During the anthem, wastebaskets will come around so that you may quietly pass them down and throw them out. It is recycled paper that will be recycled again after this. No one will read what you write.

" 'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free' " Let's simplify our lives by being free of our surplus anxieties.

To take care of ourselves is truly a spiritual exercise. In doing so, we honor the sacred nature of our being, the spark of divinity that resides inside each of us. When we pay attention to our whole selves, our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, we are, in turn, caring for and showing reverence to one small corner of the interdependent web of existence, for we, too are citizens of the universe that matter. When we recognize the importance of caring for ourselves, we become better stewards of the planet and begin increase the value we recognize in all living things and in future generations. And, when we take the time to care for ourselves, we replenish our reserves and have the capacity to care for others better.

One reason we come to church is to take care of ourselves by being part of a loving spiritual community. We become one part of the whole, knowing that we don't always have to shoulder all of our worries alone- others will worry about us and with us, as well.

Recognizing and then ridding ourselves of our surplus anxieties is one way to exercise self-care. To do so as a church community shows us that we are not alone in carrying them around. But, there are many ways to de-stress and relieve anxiety before they become "surplus". Paying attention to our inter-personal communication, setting achievable goals, forgiving your shortcomings, going to therapy or chatting with your partner, a close friend, your minister, or another or confidant, and exercising flexibility are all ways to alleviate anxiety and practice self-care. Other means of self-care include meditation, prayer, exercise and healthy eating habits, using your imagination, and enjoying your hobbies. My guilty pleasure and favorite way of unwinding is to watch my favorite TV shows!

Again, practicing self-care is not simply a matter of self-indulgence, it is a spiritual practice. It nurtures our soul. During the second anthem, I invite you to take the second piece of paper and jot down ways that you will engage in the spiritual practice of self-care- perhaps today or this week, perhaps this year. No matter. Think of it as a promise to yourself. These will not be thrown away, but instead will be carried out with you. Fold it up and place it in your pocket or your purse. Take it home and allow it to help you remain accountable to yourself. Now that we have freed ourselves of the surplus anxieties we carried in with us this morning, we will fly a little freer by together setting intentions for self-care.

May it be so.

