

## Change Anxiety and the future!

Fear of change is one of the greatest killers of our inner joy. We worry about a lot of things: that meeting with the boss, that upcoming wedding, we are afraid of moving to a new job in a new city. We worry about launching our children when they leave home. How on earth am I going to fill out the income tax return now that Charlie is gone? What happens if I don't get a job when I graduate? How am I going to get through this major surgery? If that guy at the office attacks me again I am going to freak out! Vacation somewhere else? What if we don't like the beaches and restaurants? No we will go back to Cape Cod where we have always gone every summer just to be safe...

Churches are extremely conservative institutions and usually resist any form of change on principle. One church always served apple pie with ice cream. Someone suggested apple pie with cheddar cheese. The church split over that issue.

There are a lot of ways that don't work in handling change. Many of us procrastinate. I had a friend who had a lump in her breast. Instead of going to her doctor immediately she put it off. Months went by. When she started to experience pain she finally went to see her doctor. It was malignant. Her doctor said to her "Why didn't you come to see me when you first discovered it?"

She answered: "I was afraid it might be cancer and I couldn't deal with that." She was dead within the year.

Why do we procrastinate? Fear! It is a whole lot easier to put things off than to face the fear.

Are you in an abusive relationship in your marriage? We say: "Well maybe he will change. Besides what would I do if I had to go it alone?"

Do we have an alcohol addiction or an addiction to cigarettes? "Oh" we say, "I need it to cope just now- things are pretty stressful at work and I

just couldn't add to my stress right now. I will target the first of January." Then when January comes "Well things are still stressful at work you know!"

If we are afraid of the future, afraid of change, procrastination allows us the luxury of kidding ourselves, but I guarantee you this: If we procrastinate as a lifestyle, we will not get to joy!

Strategy number two that people use to cope with change anxiety is negative criticism. The critic sits back and watches the others who are actually doing things and then gives them a performance rating. It is a great deal easier to talk about someone else's performance than to be a performer oneself. For to be the person who is actually doing it requires effort, risk, and change. As Theodore Roosevelt said:

*It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.*

When we criticize others, we are actually getting ourselves off the hook for not doing anything. Take the case of Bill who was on the cancer society. They had always had a bazar to raise funds. One year Mary was

elected the new President and she suggested that they have a draw on a new car to raise money. Bill was against it and said so openly. He said that he didn't like the direction that the cancer society was going. For one thing it was too big a risk. How would they ever pay for the car? People might get upset at being asked for money all the time and a bazar was the best way to go as far as he was concerned.

Mary however was a self-confident person. She pressed on with the support of her committee. Bill did all he could to undermine her efforts. He spoke against her in public to anyone who would listen. **He was losing power and he knew it and he did not like it.**

Mary reached her goal, paid for the car and raised \$30,000 for cancer research. It was a huge success! Bill, however, continued to oppose Mary's leadership. Bill was asked: "If you feel so strongly why don't you join the fundraising committee?"

Bill refused. He was not that sort of person. At a bazar people actually got something for their money. The other was gambling he said. When Mary raised 4 times as much money, did Bill apologize? Not on your life. Why not?

**Because Bill actually felt powerful when he criticized Mary.** And of course if Mary were to fail then he could always say: "I warned you about this! But you didn't listen to me." So two benefits for Bill: He was able to put off threatening change with the added benefit of feeling important.

If procrastination and criticism of others who are trying to make a difference are failure strategies, what actually does work?

- 1) Imaging! Jesus said: "Whatsoever things you ask for in prayer believe that you have them already and they shall be yours."

How does this work?

What you want is in the future. Take that future and bring it in to the present moment. Then believe that you already have what you want and the promise is that when we do this, it will start to happen. In other words, hold the vision before you of a job well done. Hold the success in your mind as if it was already a reality. This is what Jesus taught us.

We do this all the time with negative imaging. This is something at which we all are experts. We think negatively about the future. We picture ourselves failing at some task, at our marriage, at our job etc. In 2024 its things like getting Covid again. We play the worst scenarios through our minds... we think about the worst thing that could happen.

How do we beat anxiety?

If we follow Jesus advice, we do the exact opposite. We can play through our minds, scene by scene, as if we were already successful. This can be used after a cancer diagnosis or getting well after a health setback. There is research that shows that positive imaging can awake the immune system to fight cancer. Thinking negative thoughts is not the least bit helpful in strengthening the immune system, which we all need in a crisis. Why add stress to the equation? Being peaceful and strongly positive can actually turn the tide in many situations we face. For instance: Do we want to open our own business? We are to see ourselves doing the business well as if it were already an accomplished fact. Are we afraid of public speaking? We could instead see ourselves as successfully entertaining a crowd of 10,000 people who are all paying rapt attention! This stuff works. I know from personal experience.

Imaging is a strong technique to overcome the fears that sabotage us and kill our spirits.

2) The second strategy to cope with change anxiety is the Jewish concept of Chutzpah. That means having the courage to take bold risks. There was a minister I knew who had Chutzpah. He was concerned about the Sunday school Christian education coordinator's position.

For three months he had been approaching people to consider being Sunday School Superintendent. All had refused. The notice appeared in the bulletin every week. He began to lose sleep over it. He wrongly felt that he was somehow to blame. He became more and more anxious.

Then one day he made a decision. The Sunday service began. He got through to the children's story and finished telling it. Then he stopped and said: "I have asked everyone I know in the church to consider being Sunday School Superintendent. I have advertised in the bulletin week after week with no result. Nobody wants to do this. I feel that this position is vital in the church and so I am going to do it."

With that he left with the children for Sunday School, leaving the congregation in mid service with open mouths! Next week there was a Superintendent. What that minister did took Chutzpah. Guts!

If you have a problem today do something that will take courage! If it's a big problem break it down into little baby steps. Then take little risks. As you do, your confidence and self esteem will grow until moving mountains will be part of your repertoire!

Why does Chutzpah work? The procrastinator and the critic have something in common. They don't take risks!

If you have been here today and are forgetting everything I have said so far, please don't forget this: "Action always cures fear!"

Here is how that works: As soon as we actually do something about our worry, we have to stop worrying about it because what was in the future moves into the present. Did you ever learn to ride a bicycle? At first it was hard to get your balance. But once you did then all sorts of

possibilities opened up! Your personal freedom increased, your self confidence went up, your anxiety level diminished and you were happier than before you had tried it!

The third thing we need to say about change anxiety is the state of the modern world. It is very bleak at the moment: The Israeli Palestinian war, the Russian war against Ukraine, the rise of far-right wing politics rather than democracy...

Let's face it the future is full of uncertainty on every hand. Trying to fight things that are beyond us is not where the hope lies. Turning the clock back is just not possible. We are where we are. **Denial is not just a river in Egypt.**

In Charles Dicken's book Great Expectations Miss Havisham does not handle change well. Because she was jilted on her wedding day she froze in her tracks. So, she stopped her reality: the wedding cake was kept, now eaten out by worms, she is still in her wedding dress which is falling apart. Time stands still in that room. The clocks are stopped, the blinds are drawn. Is that us? Are we on that road? Are we resisting change in every way we can and is that why we come to church to try to keep everything the same and then we get there and discover that the pews are gone and there are screens up?

I remember a session decision here in Knox to start to use candles more in the church service. A couple left over this decision, saying it was Catholic, and went over to St. Andrews. Two weeks later St. Andrews introduced candles...

If we cannot handle change then we are doomed to reactionism, bitterness, gloom and increasing sadness.

Dick Van Dyke is 98 and he looks fabulous. What is his handle on change and how to adapt? He says **We have to keep moving**, stay positive no matter what and keep our sense of humor! What great advice.

What is a Christian response to all I have talked about today?

We can ask the powerful question:

### **Where is the still point of the Universe?**

Have we forgotten that God is our only security? Everything else changes except God who is the same yesterday, today and forever. God is the still point around which all change moves and if we are anchored there, I believe that we can handle ANYTHING!

Some people think that the way to please God is by following all the rules as closely as possible. Risk for these folks is out of the question.

But why has God put change all around us if we are not to be able to grow and profit by the change in the depths of our souls? Change is there for a reason and the reason is to build our souls by discovering **resilience, nimbleness, hope in the face of despair and laughter when things don't work out the way we thought!**

I had a friend who looked after two little squirrels. Their mother had been killed by a car. She kept the squirrels in a large cage. That was all they knew of freedom. But as they grew up, the day came when she decided to release them back into the wild. I went with her to release them.

We got to a wild area and in the middle of the wood opened the cage door. The squirrels were motionless. This was very big change for them. Slowly very slowly and gingerly they came out of the cage to look around them. They took in the bright sunlight and the tall grass and what was that tall plant, that we would call a tree? Suddenly one of them ran up my leg onto my shoulder and looked around, then suddenly they both were off and ran straight up a tree! Freedom! Wonderful, exciting freedom!

God did not put us into this world to find our security in all the cages we construct for ourselves!! We are not to stay behind the bars of our

insecurities and fears. And so, God made a world of change, for without change God knew we would stagnate and have no reason for living and die. And in the midst of all this change, the Great Creator has asked us to place our security in the One who does not change, as a sea anchor from which we can ride out any storm!

Do we know this Great God? Do we know the One who said “Lo I am with you even until the end of the world?” Why not take His advice? Just go into your room. Shut the door. Get down on your knees and ask The Great God who is the same yesterday today and forever into your life.

When Isaiah the prophet told us that God would come into our world, he had a name for Him: “Emmanuel” which means God with us. And Emmanuel has come for the express purpose of being with us. We don’t have to be alone. If we invite Emmanuel into our hearts at this time of so much uncertainty in the world, **then 2024 will be handled from a point of spiritual power previously unknown to us.**

The second world war began in September 1939. Britain’s prospects for survival looked very dim. But in December of that year King George the 6<sup>th</sup> made this quote with which we began the service. He pointed for all to see where true hope lies in the face of very dark negative change:

“I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’

And he replied:

‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.”

No matter what challenges you face, that can be you in this year of our lord, 2024!

Amen.