High anxiety: The terror of the dark unknown

by Katherine Willis Pershey in the March 7, 2012 issue

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Fear thrives in the face of the unknown. It is often beyond words and images; it is a physiological response to silence, darkness, tomorrow. It is almost always about death. You can't live in fear, at least not for very long. But you have options. You can cope; you can flee; you can pray; you can turn the lights on and make faces at the monsters. Or, if you are of a particular temperament, you can fill in all the blanks with a tool that will scribble on the surface of any fear: anxiety.

Anxiety, too, thrives in the face of the unknown. Anxiety makes a graven image of it, artfully obscuring mystery with an infinite sketch of possible disasters. It leaves no potential tragedy unturned, no catastrophe unconsidered. In the absence of certainty, anxiety assures that the worst will happen. Anxiety may save you from abject fear, but at a cost: it is exhausting and depressing.

I was an anxious child. I could not bear to follow along as Alice descended into Wonderland; even after I learned the ending, I was sure she would not escape the surreal prison. Now I am an anxious adult. Big changes wear my nerves raw. The summer I got married, moved across the country and began seminary, I awoke

many nights in the midst of full-blown panic attacks. Had I calculated the cost of textbooks into our budget? Would our car pass the California emissions test? Was I marrying the wrong man?

Generally, the calamities I expect do not come to pass. So I replace them with new ones. Time and energy that could be used constructively—for prayer, dishwashing, learning to quilt—I sacrifice to cultivate apprehension.

After my daughter Juliette was born, my anxiety skyrocketed. I saw it coming, of course—leave it to a true worrywart to have anxiety about the likelihood of having anxiety. I didn't foresee the depth of it, however. When Juliette was born strong and beautiful after a pregnancy with no complications, I hoped a wave of relief would wash over me. And it did, but ever so briefly. Once the blood and vernix were wiped from my daughter's perfect fingers, I realized that the fears and anxieties of motherhood were just beginning. That was when it hit me: I love her, and she could die.

I tried not to think about it. I didn't know what else to do; just the thought unraveled me. As I rocked Juliette back to sleep in the dark morning hours, I tried to train my mind not to consider all the bad things that could happen to her. But I couldn't chase them all away, especially when the newspaper kept me abreast of so many untimely and heartbreaking deaths. When Juliette was three months old, I had to temporarily swear off the *Los Angeles Times,* as the reports of the Sichuan province earthquake reawakened my own (reasonable) concern about the odds of a so-called Big One hitting close to home. Nothing fueled my anxiety more effectively than the reminder that the ground could literally shift beneath my feet at any moment.

I was driving to church on a Sunday morning. My husband, Benjamin, had gone early to volunteer at the weekly pancake breakfast, so I had Juliette with me in the backseat. I was absentmindedly listening to a public radio story that was well under way. There was some translation involved, so it took a little longer than usual to catch up. Then all of a sudden I realized what the distraught woman was being interviewed about: an unfathomably brutal attack on her young daughter. The interviewer noted that the perpetrator had been wanted for a similar attack against a three-month-old baby.

I started crying and hyperventilating. I slammed my hand into the radio's on/off button as quickly as I could. I tried to fake a smile at my daughter—she was too

young to understand what we'd heard, but I didn't want to scare her with my histrionics—and I focused on not crashing the car.

No one wants to hear about such violence. When I'm depressed and anxious, I can't cope with it. What I heard played over and over in my mind like a broken record, and to my horror, I pictured it in my mind's eye. It was horrific. I didn't want to live in a world in which such things happen.

I didn't want to be human if a human being could commit such an abomination. How do people go about their lives, shopping for shoes and praying for rain and eating birthday cake, when children are intentionally hurt by sadistic adults?

I don't know how I got through the morning, how I greeted the crowd of homeless men and women who partake of our weekly pancake breakfast, how I sang in the choir, how I rattled off announcements about the upcoming board meeting and Christian Women's Fellowship luncheon. I sure as hell don't know how I preached.

The text for the week was Hebrews 5:1–10. The theme of my sermon was that Christ, as our high priest, lifts up a sacrifice of lamentation on behalf of all the people. He cries and weeps and prays for us, for all humanity. At the climax of the sermon, when I alluded to the suffering in the world, my voice thickened with tears. It was probably pretty effective. A cynical listener might think that I carefully manipulated my emotions to impress the congregation with the depth of my compassion.

The truth is that when my voice broke, I almost lost it completely. I was grieving for what happened to those children, for what could happen to my child. I am terrified that I might lose my child. I am terrified that by giving voice to that fear, I'm communicating to the universe (to God?) that I'm the consummate target to become a bereaved parent.

During this season of solicitude, a church member's daughter died unexpectedly. I was still a relatively new minister, with barely enough education and experience to have a basic grasp of what to say and do and, more important, what *not* to say and do. The conventional wisdom calls for a simple, nonanxious ministry of presence. Yet each week as I visited with my parishioner, my spirit disintegrated a little more. I was forced to imagine what I would feel like if I lost Juliette. It was the last thing I wanted to imagine, a selfish thought to have while praying with a grieving mother.

I can't even figure out how parents survive the possibility of losing a child. That central mystery breaks down into a thousand anxieties: How can I strap Juliette into a car seat when I know the statistics on automobile fatalities? How can I trust anyone to babysit her when no one ever suspects that their caregiver might be abusive? How can I ever let her ride a bike, drive a car, run off to some faraway state where natural disasters are a given?

How can I live—and let my daughter live—with the reality of death? My anxiety has consequences, consequences beyond the sharp pain that often radiates between my shoulder blades and the dull ache that drums on my temples. If I can't change, Juliette will be hounded by shadows conjured by my anxiety. She'll never outgrow her childhood fears of the boogeyman if I act as though he exists. She won't be able to enjoy her life if I tether it with my fears about her death.

So I seek healing, for her sake and for mine. And while the resources of the mental health community are a part of my recovery, they are not sufficient. At the risk of reawakening old associations connecting mental illness to sin, I do experience anxiety as a soul sickness. I experience it as a spiritual condition as well as a clinical prognosis. When I give in to my anxieties, I neglect the witness of scripture. I reject Christ's teaching to consider the lilies of the field. As I fear the changing of the earth, the shaking of the mountains and the foaming of the seas, I scoff at the psalmist's promise that God is our refuge and strength.

Anxiety has a way of turning otherwise faithful Christians into foxhole atheists. I'm too busy worrying to pray, so preoccupied with anticipatory grief that I can't even properly lament.

But there is also a danger in drawing upon the resources of my faith tradition. Despite our heritage of renouncing idolatry, Christians excel at making and worshiping idols. And idols are especially tantalizing to the anxious. The idol that is thrust on me by well-meaning friends is the god of optimism, the god to whom you pray for absolute security. This god is supposed to keep you and yours safe. It is the god who selectively rescues people in need, the god who would never let anything bad happen to those who worship him.

The problem with this god is that the moment something bad does happen to those who worship him, he is abruptly and irreversibly reduced to a pile of crumbled stone. He isn't real, not in the way the God who created the heavens and the earth is real.

He doesn't breathe; he isn't in relationship. He sits there on the shelf next to the rabbit's foot, passively echoing platitudes. He is just as dead as the rabbit.

The answer cannot be to worship a god who vandalizes the face of the unknown with a cheery array of empty promises. The God the scriptures reveal—the God who lives and breathes and loves—hems us in and caresses us with holy hands. But this God does not vow to intervene every time we stub our toe; this God does not even bar us from making our bed in hell.

Yet we do not go into that dark night (gently or otherwise) alone. There is no place where we can extract ourselves from the presence of the holy one. David, in a fit of something that sounds an awful lot like anxiety, swears that "surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night" (Ps. 139:11). But even in his terror David knows that darkness is not dark to God, that the night is as bright as the day.

This is the God upon whom I must call, the God in whom I can trust. There are moments when I would give anything to worship the idol god instead, days when a God who simply creates me and loves me and dwells with me seems like a poor substitute for a god who builds an impenetrable wall around my family, around my Juliette. I have to practice rejecting the lure of the idol. You can't live and move and have your being in stones.

And while fear and anxiety are about death, the true God offers good news. The gospel does not only give flesh and bones to the presence of God. Through Jesus Christ, our high priest who knows firsthand the vulnerability of life, death is vanquished. I know this in theory: I confess and proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ. But my anxiety has taught me that believing in the risen Christ cannot be a mere intellectual exercise. God's Easter promise—that life shall be restored to life eternal—must inform the whole of my life.

In *The Brothers Karamazov,* Alyosha puts it this way: "Ah, children, ah, dear friends, do not be afraid of life! How good life is when you do something good and rightful!" We do not live in fear that death might surprise us; nor do we live fully because we know that one day we will die. We entrust ourselves to eternity, and we live to the glory of God.

This article is excerpted from Katherine Willis Pershey's book Any Day a Beautiful Change: A Story of Faith and Family, *recently published by Chalice Press.*