



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Global Storm of Anxiety”

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A reflection delivered on November 4, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom. Søren Kierkegaard*

*Every time you are tempted to react in the same old way, ask if you want to be a prisoner of the past or a pioneer of the future. Deepak Chopra*

*Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. Arthur Roche*

*Anxiety's like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you very far.  
Jodi Picoult*

### Reflection: (after a telling of “Timid Rabbit”, a Buddhist Jataka tale)

If you're like me, you have an alert on your cell phone that warns when dangerous weather fronts threaten our area. When they sound the alarm, I turn on the TV for more information and to track the storm's progress on radar. I've seen hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes cause so much loss of life and property damage to other communities that I get anxious for ours. I especially want to know when it's time to head to the basement for safety.

My anxiety over dangerous storms is an appropriate emotional response. But if I'm anxious for my personal safety over a storm hitting Kansas, not Athens, that isn't so inappropriate. Conversely, if I had *no* anxiety over a realistic imminent threat, that too would be inappropriate. I need some anxiety to prompt me to seek safety.

If you're like me, your anxiety over the upcoming elections may be way too high. I can feel my heart start racing by just saying the word 'elections'. I can feel stress hormones now flooding my bloodstream. My whole body is on heightened alert.

I have to remind myself to breathe deep. Though I might want to, I can't flee to the basement to hide from the worst possible election outcome I can imagine.

If you or I regularly have too *little* anxiety, it may keep us perfectly calm and serene, but it might also result in our doing nothing about anything. We might as well be asleep. We might not vote.

If you or I regularly carry too much anxiety, it may interfere with our normal functioning and good judgment. Emotional anxiety-overload might make us frantic, so that we head off in many directions at once with no real focus. It might make us shut down or freeze, thus incapable of taking appropriate action. And our physical response to anxiety is unhealthy, causing sleeplessness, high blood pressure, uncontrollable anger, depression, stomach disorders, irritability, and more. It's not good.

Perhaps you know Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Serenity Prayer' – "God, give 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." Niebuhr wisely reminds us not to be anxious about things we have no control over. I may not be able to control a coming storm, but I can use my anxiety to prompt me to reduce the chance I'll be injured.

That's healthy anxiety, a Goldilocks 'just right' amount that keeps me safe. And since I have control over my own actions, my anxiety urges me to vote for the candidates I think will provide the best possible outcome. This healthy level of anxiety urges me to speak about and act in support of issues that concern me. It prompts all of us to respond to danger, address problems, and risk new adventures. It even makes an athlete run faster, an inventor try harder, and a minister produce a sermon each week that hopefully, won't put you to sleep or send you screaming from the room.

I imagine many of you had anxiety when we began our building expansion project. Some of you expressed that we'd never receive the money needed. Others thought we'd never agree on what exactly was needed. Some questioned whether anything was needed.

That anxiety urged us to make a good case for why we needed to improve the building. To drive our decisions we used our mission and vision, our desire to do more and be more. We wanted better space for ourselves and to allow the community to participate in our activities. Last night we hosted the greater Athens community for the annual Economic Justice Coalition's Justice Fest. Beginning in December, we'll share our space with the Congregation Children of Israel during their own sanctuary renovation. And in January we'll host the UGA School of Social Work's Justice Symposium. These are just a few of the ways our increased space benefits those beyond our walls.

Once final details are complete, including acoustic treatments and new chairs, we'll rededicate our building in January. As you can see by our progress, we did not let anxiety freeze us. Some anxiety remains however. We need those who promised to help pay for it to continue doing so, and anyone who hasn't yet made a financial promise may still do so. I hope you all feel the project is worthy of the anxiety and risk.

There is much in our world that causes us stress and anxiety, not only climate change, politics, and building projects. Violence against groups of people, concerns over our personal finances, health, careers, relationships, children, or parents, and a general lack of kindness or

compassion causes anxious feelings. It's enough to send us all into the basement or in therapy. The pace of our lives, the amount of change and challenge we live can prompt anxiety in even the most non-anxious among us. Just writing this sermon has increased my anxiety! Psychologist Dr. Judith Bardwick sums up our world. She says, "We have data overload, emotional overload, sensory overload, and responsibility overload." (page 5, *Just Enough Anxiety*) I doubt any of you feel exempt from this.

Given this reality, how do we reduce our stress and anxiety?

Psychologist Dr. Robert Rosen, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia, suggests we need to change our attitude about anxiety. It's not all bad. If we accept that anxiety helps us get through the day and accomplish goals, then we can be a little less anxious about our anxiety.

Rosen emphasizes that anxiety indicates we care about something, we're engaged with life. He writes in his book *Just Enough Anxiety*, "[Anxiety] grabs your attention, and, if you're willing and able to examine what you're feeling and why, it moves you toward optimal performance and the deeper truths in your life." (page 13, *Just Enough Anxiety*)

Rosen offers us ten tips for living with change, uncertainty, and just the right amount of anxiety: (page 13, *Just Enough Anxiety*)

- Be fully present in each moment
- Distinguish what you can and can't control
- Be willing to embrace the unknown
- Befriend your anxiety
- Cultivate self-confidence
- Learn to manage your emotions
- Look for the positive in every experience
- Focus on your personal goal
- Keep the bigger picture in mind
- Practice patience and persistence

Buddhism clearly influences Rosen. Being present in each moment keeps us from overly worrying about the future. Instead, use your anxiety in the present moment to impact the future.

In the earlier Buddhist *Jataka* tale of the Timid Rabbit, the rabbit became anxious over something he imagined was happening. He didn't consider all the facts. He jumped to conclusions and then spread his anxiety among the other animals. Not until the wise lion made the rabbit examine the situation, did the rabbit let go of its anxiety. All the other animals caught up in rabbit's anxiety blamed rabbit, and never examined their own emotional reactivity.

Rabbit might have been less reactive if it had followed Rosen's ten tips. And if we follow them, we'll actually change our brains, enabling our emotional responses to be tempered by our more rational minds. This becomes easier over time because repetition rewires our brains. Call it

spiritual practice or behavioral modification, we can learn to react differently to the challenges of the world.

This election year, many people seem anxious. Early voting by both Republicans and Democrats has more than doubled the number of past mid-term elections. A recent report showed Georgia had the biggest increase. Hopefully, this anxiety will produce the results we want, however we vote.

In two days, remember not to despair if you are disappointed with the results. Direct your feelings, especially your anxiety, towards actions that increase the likelihood you'll be happy next time. Patience and persistence, even resistance, will have an impact. Meanwhile, breathe deep, don't overreact, and pray to all the known gods for the outcome you desire.

May you have reason to celebrate on Tuesday and in the days to follow. May it be so.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. What is your current level of anxiety, and how are you controlling or managing it?
2. How do you engender hope and optimism in others, or do you increase the level of anxiety?
3. When has anxiety energized you to work for, or manage, a change in yourself or the world?