



## A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

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### Childlike Feelings

Fred Rogers dedicated his life and decades of television programming to helping children actually feel their feelings—wallow in them, express them, process them, let them develop. Yet, adulthood, for most of us, is about acquiring the skills to feel no feelings at all—to sublimate our exuberance, to repress our fears, to stuff our anger, to bury our pain.

Feelings are considered distracting, inefficient, unoptimizable, unprofessional — childish. They interfere with our capacity to work. In fact, some of us use work, especially if we're "good" at it, to avoid dealing with our feelings.

Doctors, social workers, caregivers, or anyone else who works in a field landmined with intense emotions, compartmentalize themselves in order to survive: There's the helping self, tasked with meeting needs, no matter how devastating the circumstances, which is walled off from the feeling self. It's a coping mechanism, a survival strategy, but with time (and without prayer/therapy) that distanced posture just becomes the posture.

Mr. Rogers, as he is most commonly known, far from performing, was convinced that childlikeness was not a childish trait to be jettisoned with adulthood. Instead, it should be embraced and supported with adult understanding and empathy.

I thoroughly enjoyed the recent film about Fred Rogers, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." In it, Mr. Rogers reminds us (as we studiously avoid talking about the imminence and inevitability of death), "To die is human. Anything human is mentionable, and anything mentionable is manageable."

So many of us spend years studiously managing our feelings by ignoring their existence altogether. What Mr. Rogers insisted, in words and by example, is that the best sort of life is the one where those feelings are recognized as a worthy, inextricable, and essential part of us, every day.

And if I am allowed to feel my feelings, then others will be allowed to feel theirs. And I will not be afraid of their feelings (or how their feelings make me feel), because that is a part of life—part of living, part of being fully alive.

### **Fight, Flight, or Freeze**

Seasons like what we are walking through right now, with COVID-19, challenge us, because a wide variety of feelings arise—helplessness, fear, anxiety, anger. And feelings—especially strong feelings like those I just mentioned—change us, at least temporarily, both psychologically and physiologically.

The coping mechanisms ingrained in our souls and bodies are the well-known primitive responses of fight, flight, and freeze.

When we face a perceived threat, our blood flow downshifts to feed the major muscle groups and internal organs. Our carotid arteries constrict to prevent that heightened blood flow from inducing a stroke. As a result of that shift, we are prepared to fight and not bleed to death; the major muscles in our legs fill with oxygen, and are prepared to run.

If running or fighting are not options, we play possum: we freeze.

Involuntarily, we do all this to survive the moment, but when we do so we also sacrifice our fine motor skills (it is difficult to dial 911 in a moment of panic) and our cognitive flexibility (our brains are no longer receiving the blood oxygen necessary for studied, rational thought).

However, once the danger has passed, our blood flow returns to normal and we reengage our normal lives.

Imagine a herd of antelope chased by a cheetah. In coordinated panic, the antelope focus on running. They don't stop to eat, drink, or rethink their strategy. They just run until the cheetah either gives up or takes down one of the herd. The instant that happens, the remainder of the herd stops and returns to normal grazing. In many ways, it is the same with us. This is appropriate management of normal, healthy fear.

Fear, when short-lived in an immediate situation of danger, is necessary and useful. It prompts us to enact our coping mechanisms to address the danger. Such fear can even be considered a gift.

The response is quite different for unhealthy fears, which we call phobias, anxiety, or trauma.

For example, trauma is induced when we find ourselves in out-of-the ordinary, life-threatening situations where we have no control and from which there is no escape. Trauma results from the enactment of our freeze response when the freeze does not end.

When an opossum “plays ‘possum,” it does so to make a predator think it’s dead. Once the predator leaves, the opossum will jump up and run off. The freeze only lasts until he can either flee or fight.

In trauma reactions, we don’t experience the option to leave the freeze. Therapies for trauma are centered upon unlocking the “stuck” freeze response.

Another unhealthy fear response is anxiety. Anxiety is the fear of what might be, rather than the fear of what is happening in the moment. When we experience anxiety, it tends to linger, because it is never quite real; it is always anticipating a negative possibility, and so it is never ending.

Anxiety and trauma are fears that never seem to resolve. So, the body and mind are overwhelmed, as if in a constant state of danger. The antelope never stop running.

Exhaustion, irrational thinking, compromised immune systems, and other physiological complications, are just a few of the detrimental results of persistent anxiety.

Yet there is hope! There are ways of thinking and acting that can guard you and others from such unhealthy fears. Three of the best ways, also affirmed by evidence-based psychological research, are three pieces of divine wisdom that have been promoted for many generations.

## **What Is**

Jesus gave the prescription for anxiety during his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-34):  
*“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”*

It is in the last two sentences that the prescription is found: *“Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* Or, to paraphrase: live in the *What is* not in the *What if*.

Tomorrow is not yet real and when it is real it will be today. To worry about tomorrow is to live a not-yet-real existence and to focus on the *“what ifs”* of life. These produce anxiety. To counteract anxiety, Jesus told us to live solely in the *“what is”* of life. To think in this way is health-giving.

We may ask ourselves, “Am I living today dealing with *What is*, or am I imagining tomorrow and the *What if*?”

Are you thinking, “What if I get sick and die this fall? What if I lose my job? What if I have no money? What if...?”

Think like this and you cannot help but experience anxiety. There are better questions to ponder: “Am I sick today? Am I broke today?” If I am sick today I can deal with it. If I am broke today, I can deal with it. *What if* leads to being frozen. *What is* leads to healthy and appropriate action.

A second way to deal with unhealthy fear is to focus on the positive. Billions of dollars of research has been poured into cognitive restructuring, and cognitive behavioral therapies. Yet, most of it can be summarized in the words of Apostle Paul (Philippians 4:6-8): *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”* In other words, look at a situation as it is—he never suggested denial—assess the negatives and the positives, and then focus on the positive.

Of course, all of this is easier said than done. At least it appears difficult, as so few persons, whether Christian or not, seem actually to embrace these principles. We all need God’s help in this, as well as help from others. No doubt that’s why Paul recommended prayer at the beginning of the passage.

A third means of recovery from debilitating fear is to recognize the need for action and purpose in the midst of times of fear and helplessness. It is appropriate to remind you of the words of former president Franklin D. Roosevelt: “Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear.”

We live in a world where there is something to fear everywhere. People frequently imagine that other people possess some rare gene or magical power that rids them of fear. The truth is, courageous people carry on in the face of fear. We find the courage to escape the grip of fear and carry on. The fear remains, but we overcome it with faith and override it with action.

Courage is not a lack of fear, but the possession and pursuit of a value that is greater. To embrace purpose and meaning lifts us from the helplessness of anxiety and trauma. Proverbs (29:18) reminds us that: *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."* As I mentioned last Sunday, Jesus Christ calls us to a life of service, rooted in love for our neighbors.

Conventional wisdom agrees that while in the midst of depression and worry, working to help someone else is good medicine; this is the embracing of purpose—God's purpose.

Jesus said, *"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

What is at the core of your purpose in life?  
Do your feelings dictate that, or does God's Word?

What value do you want to add to this day?  
How can you add the love of Jesus to your relationships?

What strength do you have to offer?  
How will you demonstrate your spiritual gifts?

How will you trust the Lord today?  
Where will you lift His Word above your own thoughts?

Pray with me for grace for this day...