



WORRYWART OR FRIVOLOUS FOOL?

By Susan Vogt

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“Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed.” (Luke 10:41)

Easy for Jesus to say; he wasn't a *mother!*

I don't know if it's an occupational hazard or simply my unique character flaw but I have spent much of my adult life trying to tame worries. My husband and I have the same children, income, and future yet he doesn't seem to worry half as much as I do. He says I worry enough for both of us. I say some worry prompts action and if I didn't worry our kids would have caught colds and died because they didn't wear warm enough clothes, or would rot their teeth with pop and their minds with sitcoms. He wouldn't notice that the teens stayed out till 2:00 a.m. because he would be peacefully sleeping and would always feel confident that they weren't drinking alcohol.

Some of my worries are based in reality and productive, others are just frivolous or conjecture. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference; they cause stress regardless. Following are some things I'm learning about how to deal with worries.

1. Differentiate between productive worries and frivolous ones.

“Hmm, that wound looks like it could get infected.” Now that's a worthy worry. On the other hand, worrying over a bad hair day is trivial and drains me of energy – at least I have hair. Some people on chemotherapy would be glad to trade places with me.

2. If the worry can't change anything, let it go.

It would be nice to have pleasant weather for an upcoming picnic or other outdoor activity but I can't change the weather. All I can do is make some preparations to deal with the weather or plan an alternate activity. Obsessing on how terrible it will be if it rains or snows (or doesn't snow if it's a ski outing) is a waste of energy and good prayer. Better to pray that I can develop an attitude of joy and gratitude regardless of the weather.

For a congenital worrier, however, this resolve is not enough. I have to buttress it with a substitute thought. What works for me is to use the worry as a prompt to pray for the person or situation. When I have back pain I use it as a reminder to pray for whomever in my family currently has a problem. It gets the focus off me. When I'm worried about how to deal with an ADHD child I offer God my anxiety as a form prayer. Unloading on my husband usually helps too. Over the years I've learned to say, “Jim, I don't want a solution for this worry; I just want to ventilate.” After listening, he often will defuse the worry with humor.

3. Let serious worries be a prompt for action.

Sometimes, however, letting go of the worry can short circuit a solution. Worries can serve as a motivator. If I'm worried about a child's school success, it might mean it's time to have a teacher conference or develop clearer study routines. If I'm worried about my health, it might prompt me to make a doctor's appointment rather than just hoping it will get better.

Being a student of worrying, I've also noticed that worries seem to expand to fill the amount of time I allot them. Sometimes life is hard and hands us something that is genuinely worth worrying about and maybe taking action on. When life is going rather smoothly, however, I will still find something to worry about – What if I get sick right before a big trip or meeting? Are we being too strict or too lenient in our parenting? Will our kids keep the faith? Will they embarrass us in front of relatives or friends? Or simply, why can't I lose ten more pounds? Then something big happens, 9-11, a death or serious illness in the family, close friends consider divorce. Suddenly, the previous worries get shoved into the background.

When the crisis is over many of the other worries loom up again but some of them have solved themselves. I don't want to wish for big worries but it sure does help put the small ones in perspective. Sometimes it helps for me to spend some time with a person who has a serious worry. Not only can I provide some compassion and help but it also fills up my worry quotient.

Are you a worrywart or frivolous fool? I'll trade you half of my worries for half of your foolishness. But then perhaps I'd worry if I made a good trade.