

## Coping with the Current Anxiety

By the Rev. Dr. Paul J. Melrose

The current anxiety, fed here in Michigan by job loss, threat of more job loss, threat of loss of income, inability to get credit, fear of not being able to pay bills, buy food, heat my home for many of us keeps our anxiety level very high. It is true that our mental and emotional and spiritual health and stability certainly is related to our personal sense of economic well being. It is even further influenced by the economic climate in which we all live. Being influenced by it does not necessarily mean we are overwhelmed by it. Rather we can be challenged to find ways to take control of those parts of our lives we can make an impact on and shape what we can in our lives.

In seminary I did a field work experience in a church in a deeply poverty stricken neighborhood. But the community of people in worship and in other church activities smiled, had an upbeat outlook and looked forward to getting up each day. This made me think of a story a friend of mine recently shared with me. A noted religious leader – a rabbi – and family therapist, Edwin Friedman – wrote a book called *Friedman's Fables*. One of his fables had to do with a string of dominos, precariously situated, particularly when one of them lost his balance began to fall, and in falling fell into another. You can picture what began to happen; the entire string of dominoes, all vertically straight standing next to each other, began to fall also, doing so in sequence as the increased force of the dominoes, gained speed and more quickly and powerfully fell into the next domino. Several dominoes, further down the line, wondered what they could do to prevent the fall; perhaps if many of them stood together they could withstand the pressure and stop the force of these dominoes. They were nervous and worried about the impact that might occur. One domino stepped out of the line. The dominoes came crashing down and the entire line collapsed, except the one domino that stepped out of line and remained standing. This one domino decided not to be influenced by the anxiety and fear of falling which pushed all the other dominos together and further influenced their fall.

We can be like this one domino, says Friedman; we can take charge of anxiety and use it to create at the minimum good coping skills, and at the best approaches to our situation which can provide us with a good enough outlook to help us move ahead positively. What does this mean? Look carefully at your own life situation: make wise decisions, surround yourself with people who support this idea and are trying to move ahead themselves. But in the process care for yourself in some very significant ways.

Firstly, pay attention to feelings. Be honest with yourself and loved ones about your anxiety or fear of loss of any or your entire current life situation. When you welcome those feelings into your life and recognize them they will not have control and unduly drive your thoughts and actions. Make honest steps to control your spending, save; cut back if you need to. Keep fun in your life, whether through games with family, fun reading or other ways to help support a positive outlook. If you are struggling to keep a job, see what you need to do to improve. Maybe you need to start putting together a resume. If you think you can't find a job in this area look for a job. If your family needs

to split, with one spouse working at a distance, find others in this situation so you can receive support. Pay attention to those spiritual truths from which you take comfort. Look to your religious community for the caring and support it can provide. Further, see where you may be able to reach out. Many others have lived with less economic and personal wealth and possessions and may in more difficulty and rely on agencies for help. They could use your help and you will benefit with the happiness of helping another.

If you need professional help look around. Many mental health professionals, will try to work with you if you have no health insurance or less income, if only to help you sort out what is going on and identify things that if you can't stay in therapy you might be able to do for yourself. Finally, don't withdraw. The domino who stepped out of the crowd did so in order to reengage with the others in control of his anxiety. Stay in contact with people to help stay in focus, fight against the competition that will arise from perceived scarcity and appreciate history as well. There is a spirit, for many of us it lies in our faith, and for others they find something in the world around them, which allows them to move forward. Find that spirit and stay with it. And if you need mental, emotional, spiritual support don't withdraw; get help. Even there you will not be alone. Hang in!

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