

Dealing With Fear And Anxiety

A Sermon by the Rev. Erik J. Buss

What is anxiety? Many of us feel anxious about our jobs, or our marriages, or our friendships, or our children, quite regularly. We have all probably felt that tightening of our stomach that comes with feelings of anxiety. Maybe we can't fall asleep at night, because we just can't stop worrying about our latest problem. Yet how many of us could give a good definition of anxiety, one that would tell us where the true causes of it lie? When is anxiety good, spurring us to act, and when is it destructive, paralyzing us with doubt? Here are some of the teachings of the New Church on the subject.

First, we need to ask ourselves what exactly anxiety is. We often say "I'm a bit tense today" or speak of feeling anxious about something. But aren't we normally describing the symptoms? We say we are anxious or tense when we feel tension in our shoulders or stomach, or when we get a certain kind of headache, or when we get irritable for no reason, or when we feel unaccountably tired. Even Webster's Dictionary defines anxiety as a "painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind, usually over an impending or anticipated ill." It goes on to describe how it can show itself as sweating, tension, increased pulse. This definition is describing symptoms.

The definition that Swedenborg's Writings give goes to the root of the problem of anxiety. This definition is that anxiety arises "from being deprived of what ... which we love. Those who are affected only with bodily and worldly pleasures, or who love only such concerns, grieve when they are deprived of them; but those who are affected with spiritual goods and truths and love them, grieve when they are deprived of them" (AC 2689:2). Isn't that so simple and clear, encompassing all kinds of anxiety? If we feel anxious about getting up in front of a crowd or talking to a stranger, isn't it from fear of losing that person's good opinion of us by coming across as stupid or wrong? When we feel anxious about whether we are good enough to get to heaven, aren't we fearing that we will lose the good in heaven which we love? When we feel anxious about making a long-term commitment in a relationship, don't we fear losing our self-respect if that person dumps us because we opened up to them and they rejected what they saw, or if we make a big mistake and blow it ourselves?

The teachings for the New Church tell us even more about the source of anxiety. Anxiety is caused by the presence of spirits with us. The spiritual world is very real, and influences us all the time. Some spirits delight in stirring up our minds and making us feel anxious. Why is this significant to us? Well, isn't it easier to fight someone else than to fight against ourselves? When we see anxiety as coming from a source outside of ourselves, we don't have to chastise ourselves for feeling anxious, afraid or depressed. We can chastise the spirits with us. And instead of asking the Lord to, as it were, carve out the evil part of us, we can ask Him to cut off the influence of these spirits. In other words, by recognizing that anxiety comes from spirits with us, we objectify our problem and make it easier to deal with.

We can be helped by recognizing that anxiety is a fear of losing something we love, and comes from spirits with us. However, we need to distinguish what kind of anxiety it is. Some kinds of anxiety are useful for us to feel, and some are destructive. For instance, the Swedenborg says that we always feel anxiety when we are tempted. When we are tempted some good love we have is threatened and we come to doubt that it can survive this onslaught of evil it is facing. A person can have his commitment to a spouse tempted by a strong desire to commit adultery. This desire threatens the marriage, and because the person loves the marriage he feels anxiety about the conflict. If he didn't love marriage, the thought of cheating would cause no anxiety and there would be no temptation. He wouldn't even stop to think about not doing it.

Another reason the Lord allows us to feel anxiety for a good reason is to spur us to action. For instance, if we have done something wrong, the pangs of conscience we feel immediately afterward cause anxiety. That is good, because the feeling makes us resolved not to do it again. The Lord also allows us to feel anxiety when we learn a new truth and realize that it is telling us we need to change our lives. In this instance we are probably feeling anxiety at having to give up an evil way of living that we don't want to. For example, a businessperson who realizes that not telling the whole truth about his product is actually lying and stealing might feel anxiety that he will lose business or his position in his company if he changes to a more honest approach and doesn't make as many sales.

Anxiety does not have to focus on a loss we personally will feel. A person can feel anxiety at being unable to help other people she loves.

For instance, parents often have to let children make choices that they know are damaging to them. They won't stop the child because they respect the child's right to make choices. Parents can feel lots of anxiety and fear for the child because they know he is damaging good loves from the Lord. Worry for others probably feels worse than any other kind of anxiety because there is nothing we can do to make the problem go away. All we can do is trust that the Lord is taking care of that person as well as anyone possibly could.

Misfortune and grief we experience also can make us feel anxiety. This is good because it can cause us to elevate our thoughts to spiritual issues. It gives us a chance to think about the Lord's governance of the world and our own lives. For instance, the pain and suffering of many in the world has caused anxiety for many. It has led them to wonder why God allows these events, and what it says about the nature of God, of His respect for our free will, of the nature of evil, and how we respond to it. Because a value is threatened - in this instance our love for peace, we can feel anxiety even though nothing threatens us directly.

These kinds of anxiety are good because they all arise from a good love. They are a sign that we are spiritually healthy. If we didn't have good loves, we wouldn't feel these kinds of anxiety. The challenge we face is that a good feeling can turn into something destructive if we focus too much on it. One of the leading causes of destructive anxiety comes from focusing too much on something that once was positive. For instance, the anxiety we feel in temptation, which makes us feel that we will never get to heaven, is good because it makes us realize how much we need the Lord's help. However, when we dwell on it and lament about our evil and wonder whether it is worth the effort to try being good since we are on our way to hell anyway, then the anxiety becomes destructive. Similarly, a parent can feel a healthy worry for a child who is choosing a harmful path, but when they can't stop thinking about it, can't sleep because of it, and decide they are a worthless parent, that anxiety becomes destructive. Anxiety is like an adrenaline rush. It can be useful to push us through a hard time because it gives us that extra bit of energy we need. However, just as adrenaline is harmful to the body when it stays for too long, so anxiety becomes destructive when we dwell on it.

Another major cause of anxiety that is destructive is fear of losing something in the future that is not essential to our long-term happiness. It is so easy to get caught up in our worldly possessions that we lose

track of their importance. Money can easily become the foremost issue in our lives, even when we have enough and to spare. The Lord teaches that good people are not anxious, and that they define care for the morrow, or unnecessary anxiety as "suffering about losing or not receiving things that are not necessary to life's useful employments" (HH 278:2). In other words, they worry about money only when it impacts on their ability to be useful people.

I should mention one other cause for anxiety that the Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church give. That is mental disorder of some sort. If our minds are disturbed, we are wide open to the influence of our destructive tendencies, to hell within ourselves. We can find ourselves anxious over every little problem without any cause. Although everyone needs the Lord's help in their lives, these people need to get their bodies and minds fixed before the Lord can work with their spirits. This is an important factor to be aware of.

Isn't it interesting that the Lord gives us many good reasons why we might feel anxious, but only a few that are destructive? Maybe this fact can lead us to look at anxiety in a different light. Maybe we can see that much of the time we feel it, it is productive, some sadness the Lord is allowing us to feel now so we can feel greater happiness later. As with anything good the Lord gives us, the hells affecting us will try to turn it into something destructive. But in itself, anxiety is a useful tool.

With this idea in mind, we can approach anxiety with a far more calm attitude. We can ask ourselves, "Is this anxiety now serving any useful purpose? Am I motivated to do what is useful? Am I acting in a loving way because of it?" If yes, we can say a quiet thank you to the Lord for it. If not, we can reject it as an influence of hell, something we want to have nothing to do with. Either way, we are in control of our anxiety, instead of having it control us.

One final teaching about anxiety offers us a hope for what our lives can become like. It is that anxiety becomes less and less an issue in our lives as we progress spiritually. Most of us are probably at the point where the Lord's words about worrying apply to us: "Therefore I say to you, do not worry 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, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying

can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things." As we become more advanced, we become more content in the Lord and become more willing to accept the Lord's guidance in our lives. Listen to the description of how angelic people think about the events that occur in their lives: "Very different is the case with those who trust in the Divine. These people, despite the fact that they are concerned about future events, still are not, because they do not think of the morrow with worry, still less with anxiety. Their spirit is unruffled whether they obtain the objects of their desire, or not; and they do not grieve over the loss of them, being content with their lot. If they become rich, they do not set their hearts on riches; if they are raised to honors, they do not regard themselves as more worthy than others; if they become poor, they are not made sad; if their circumstances are meager, they are not dejected. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things advance toward a happy state to eternity, and that whatever befalls them in time still leads towards it." (AC 8478:3). We can all eventually come to feel this in our hearts. For now, we can be content that the Lord is slowly guiding us to that time when anxiety will no longer be an issue in our lives. We can use the anxiety we feel to become happier, more productive people.

Lessons: Matt 6:25-34, AC 2689:2, AC 8478:3