

March 23-27, 2020 Edition

The Year Of Cultivating #12

Cultivating Calm:

The Four Components Of Anxiety

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to be talking about worry, anxiety, fear & courage. Seems like a pretty good time to do it if you ask me. I've never really struggled much with worry in my life. I mean, sure, there have been those occasions when I worried. I might even say there have been seasons in which I struggled with worry. But for the most part worry has not been a big part of my life. Now Judy on the other hand- she has to work pretty hard at not letting worry and anxiety get the best of her. But no matter how much you do or do not struggle with worry I think all of us could attest to the truth of this statement:

Worry is a heavy load. Proverbs 12:25 (NCV)

I think most of us would nod our heads and say, "amen", to that statement. But what do we do about it? Especially in the midst of a crisis like the one we're all facing to one degree or another together right now? We all know that worry is a heavy load but why do some of us struggle with it more than others? It doesn't seem fair, does it? And yet it's true. Some of us struggle with worry while others STRUGGLE WITH WORRY. And then we read (or have quoted at us by a well meaning preacher) verses like this:

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.
2 Timothy 1:7 (NLT)*

If I struggle with worry what am I supposed to do with verses like this? "Ohhhhhhhh! I haven't been given a spirit of fear and timidity??? Why didn't you say so?!?! I'll just stop my worrying now. Thanks for the tip!" Sometimes I wonder if lessons like this one on worry might not do more harm than good. Not because what the Bible teaches us about worry and anxiety isn't true but because we in the Americanized Church are involved in a sort of sales pitch. It seems to me like Jesus is being "sold" as a product that will take away all your problems. All your negative emotions will be gone. All your negative health issues- gone. All your money problems- gone. All your relational issues- gone. I could go on but you get the point, right? We are sold a "product" that Jesus never offered. That was never the promise. His promise was, "I will walk through everything with you- both the good and the bad." But that's not what we're told by much of American Christianity.

So what happens then when I struggle with worry or my health or my finances or my relationships? Well for many of us we're afraid to admit it or let it out into the bright light of day. Why? Because if we do we feel like we're questioning the effectiveness of Jesus Himself. Or we're questioning our church or our pastors or our community or even our-own-selves. And so we keep it bottled up inside and don't admit it- often not even to ourselves.

Until we can't keep it bottled up any longer. And then- we explode. And often burn any bridges with our faith community exactly at the moment we need them the most. But Jesus isn't a "product" and He never promised we would have negative emotions and experiences in this life. In fact He promised exactly the opposite of that.

I have told you these things so that you might have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble. But be brave for I have defeated the world. John 16:33 (NCV)

So don't be afraid to let your worries and anxieties and fears out into the light of day. Alcoholics Anonymous likes to say, "our secrets keep us sick," and that goes for worry and anxiety every bit as much as drugs and alcohol.

Right now all of us are scared. We all handle our fear differently and we all express our fear differently but we are all scared. For good reason I think- the future is very uncertain right now and some people express their fear through worry and anxiety and some through anger and exploding all over anyone that happens to trigger them- often a family member they are having to spend an awful lot of time around while everyone is scared. It's ok to be angry about the things that are going on. You don't want to let that anger control you but it should be a cue that there's something deeper going on inside of you.

So how should I handle the fear, worry and anxiety (which often leads to anger) that I'm experiencing and odds are I will continue experiencing for the foreseeable future? We'll talk about that this week as we look at the 4 components of anxiety and worry but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what you've always believed Jesus promised.

Tuesday Reflection: The first component I want to look at when it comes to worry, anxiety and fear in our lives is the physiological/biological component. I don't know what your experience with churches and the discussion of worry is but so often churches can really beat up their walking wounded. I've talked to SO many people who were made to feel like second-class-Christians or worse if they struggle with worry and/or anxiety. Often all it takes is for me to announce that I'm going to be talking about worry to get some folks started down the path of worrying themselves sick.

So let me start off by hopefully setting your mind at ease. For many folks who struggle with worry and anxiety it's not so much a matter of how much faith they do or don't have but more a matter of their biology and physiology- specifically their blood chemistry. We talk about this a lot here at Riverside but when Adam & Eve brought sin into the world it didn't just short-circuit their relationship with heaven and God. It did do that- but it did more than just that. A lot more:

Adam landed us in the dilemma we're in-first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death. That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone. Romans 5:12-13 (NLT)

Since sin entered the world not one of us has been exempt from its influence. And that "influence" disturbed the relationship between God and "everything and everyone". In other words, it wasn't just our spiritual relationship with God that was disrupted. It was also our relationship with each other- as soon as sin came into this world Adam and Eve were blaming each other and pointing their fingers at anyone and everyone else that they could. Sin also disrupted our relationship with the creation. Suddenly the world around us started to hurt us. Animals, venomous bugs/snakes/fish, accidents and sickness and disease entered the world and have caused untold amounts of pain and confusion. Right now we get that maybe more than any other time in our lives because of this strange virus that has brought everything to a screeching halt in our lives. And finally our relationship with ourselves was influenced- mental illness, self harm and the impacts of sickness, disease and/or physiological/biological imbalances can REALLY influence us.

And that brings us to worry, anxiety and fear. It has been widely accepted for as long as I can remember that if we are born with diabetes (a deficiency in our ability to make insulin) then it just makes sense for someone to give themselves insulin injections. Nobody questions a person's spirituality who has diabetes. It's a chemical imbalance in the body and not a question of sin or

weakness. But I'll never forget when it became obvious to both of us that Judy was struggling with depression (and yes, I have her permission to talk about this with all of you) and anxiety. She tried everything she could think of to keep herself from taking "psychiatric medications" because of the stigma that went along with them. Churches often told people that had depression problems that if they just had enough faith they wouldn't need to stoop to taking "happy pills". It didn't help matters that when we finally got to a point where we were ready to consider medications I was working as a youth minister at a church. What would people say/think/do if they knew?

I decided to do all I could to educate myself about depression (which was mainly listening to my brilliant wife who did most of the research and then talked to me about what she had learned). Depression was a chemical imbalance in the brain revolving around something called serotonin. Medications like Prozac and others simply leveled the playing field for people whose bodies weren't able to create or collect as much serotonin as the rest of us take for granted. They weren't "happy pills" (and having lived with this woman before and after her experiences with these medications I can testify to that ;o)- they simply leveled her moods and emotions. The results were nothing less than miraculous for her and for our marriage/family. Within 3 months of going on these medications I was ready to erect a monument to whoever it was the discovered/created Prozac. It was fascinating to me that nobody would think twice about a diabetic injecting the insulin they needed to level their blood chemistry but folks wrestling with depression? That was another matter. The stigma attached to depression and the medications associated with it have come a long way over the last 25 years. Most (emphasis on "most") churches/Christians would no longer look down their noses at someone who admitted to taking a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (like Prozac) but for some reason folks who struggle with anxiety haven't enjoyed the same level of acceptance.

And yet it's the same concept. Some folks that struggle the most with anxiety do so not because they're weaker than Christians who don't but because they have a chemical imbalance. I'm not a scientist and I don't play one on TV (or in my reflections) but here's a quick run down of what I've learned about anxiety. When it comes to calming us down when stress or fear rears its ugly head the human body's main neurotransmitter is called "GABA" (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid). When the body senses stress it sends an order to pump out some GABA and as that chemical floods the blood stream we are calmed and able to slow down our heart rate and respiration. We feel better as the fear and stress reactions melt away. But for folks who struggle the most with fear, worry and anxiety there seems to be some kind of break down in the production of GABA. When scientists look at the blood chemistry of folks who wrestle with anxiety related disorders they find extremely low amounts of GABA in their systems. Folks who aren't generally bothered by anxiety disorders are found to have high levels of GABA coursing through their veins. The more GABA a person has in their blood the harder it is to get their hearts pumping.

So folks who we would consider to be "daredevils" (people who only feel "alive" when they're jumping out of airplanes without a parachute having tossed the chute out before they jumped and plan on catching it in mid-air and putting it on ideally before they hit the ground) aren't just crazy- they have super high amounts of GABA in their blood.

So what does all of that mean? That generally speaking the extent to which a person struggles with anxiety/worry (or doesn't) isn't a sign of their spiritual maturity or strength (or lack

thereof)- it's simply a matter of their blood chemistry more than anything. If you don't struggle with anxiety that's great (for you) but it's not usually because you're some kind of spiritual giant- it's more often that you were lucky enough not to have the influences of this broken world on your body manifest itself as low levels of GABA. And if you do struggle with anxiety it's not simply a matter of a lack of faith or spiritual maturity- it's more often a sign that when it came to how the influences of this broken world impact your human body and blood chemistry you ended up with a system that for whatever reason doesn't produce GABA in the same levels as it does in most everyone else. The message of the Bible is that that's not the way God planned it. In the beginning there was no fear or worry or anxiety. But then we broke the world and the effects of sin impact us in more ways than we'd care to admit. We caused this problem but Jesus came to fix it. His sacrifice means we don't have to be defined by our perceived weaknesses and that they will not have the final say about who we are:

But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. Romans 8:20-23 (NLT)

So before you go beating yourself up over how much you struggle with worry, anxiety or fear (and before you go judging someone else for their anxiety) recognize that one component of this is purely physiological/biological in nature specifically with how it relates to your blood chemistry. It's not the only component but it's a pretty huge part of it and if we don't acknowledge it we'll end up with a massive elephant in the room (or sitting on our chest) that nobody even recognizes is there which will mess people up. And God doesn't want you to be messed up.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok- so yesterday we talked about one component of worry, anxiety and fear that impacts how much we struggle with these things and that first component was physical/biological in nature. There's not a whole lot folks who struggle with a body that for one reason or another struggles to produce GABA can do other than seek medical help (if you have no idea what I'm talking about go read yesterday's reflection). Today we're going to focus on the second component of worry, anxiety and fear- the psychological component.

If you've ever spent much time thinking or studying human behavior then you've more than likely been exposed to the ongoing debate- is behavior governed more by nurture or nature? In other words, is my behavior more a product of my genetics/biology/physiology or more a product of my experiences and learning? Scientists have debated this for as long as there have been scientists but I always think about those commercials where someone would eventually sort of shrug and say, "why can't we have both?" and everyone would cheer and lift them up on their shoulders like they'd just won the Super Bowl. When it comes to worry, anxiety and fear it's partly a component of our nature (genetics which impact blood chemistry and physiology) and partly a component of our "nurture" (our learning and psychological make up). Again- I'm not a scientist so for those of you who are I imagine you're shaking your head right now and thinking, "Ed... you should stick to theology and leave the heavy lifting to the scientists", and if this is too simplistic for you you'll have to forgive my overly simple mind and how I grasp things.

As far as I can understand it our psychology is all about how we think and the patterns that govern our emotions. Our psychology isn't completely separated from our biology and physiology- they impact each other quite a lot but they're also separate so let's talk about this component for a bit. Psychologists will tell you that humans can have their psychology influenced even before we're born. And we don't need to be able to have developed the ability to speak and understand before our parents can cause us to develop deeply embedded patterns of thinking. For instance, if a baby is out crawling around in the backyard and a garter snake comes slithering by and that baby's mom freaks out and screams and grabs the baby up and runs inside that baby will likely develop an aversion to snakes even if he/she doesn't remember the incident. But if that snake keeps slithering over to the yard next door and there's another baby/mommy enjoying the day what might happen if that mom wasn't afraid of snakes but rather enjoyed them (I know... a whole other psychological disorder to some of us but still let's trace this out ;o) and instead of screaming and running away the mommy in this case picks up the snake and even lets the baby hold it? That baby would probably grow up liking snakes or at least not being totally freaked out by them.

That's just one example of how we can have profound psychological patterns imprinted deep within our minds before we even have the ability to communicate. And even after we develop communication skills we can have these profound patterns imprinted deep within us depending on the impact an event or experience has on us and the importance of the person causing that event or experience. Parents can REALLY mess a kid up, can't we? But we can also have a tremendous influence for good on our kids. All that to say, these deeply seated patterns of thought influence us in ways we probably don't realize and can cause us to really struggle with anxiety, worry and fear as adults without even necessarily understanding why. The Bible calls these thought patterns, "strongholds". Think of them like deeply entrenched and reinforced enemy positions within your very mind.

So what can be done about these strongholds? Well, it turns out you can pull them down with Jesus' help:

We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons... to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments... We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 (NLT)

Turns out I can work on the psychological patterns that are so powerful the Bible calls them strongholds by using the powerful weapon of being careful with my thoughts. Seems crazy but our thoughts as it turns out are pretty stinking powerful. I could probably walk you through an exercise right now where I encouraged you to remember an amazingly fantasmagorical and awesomeriffic experience you've had in the past (those are deep theological terms and not just everybody can wield them with the skill and aplomb that I just did so don't over think it... just keep going). I could encourage you to close your eyes and remember the sights, the sounds, the smells and the feelings that you were experiencing on that day. And depending on how well I did at this I could probably get you to start feeling some of those same feelings right now. I could do the same with bad stuff that's happened in your past but I don't want you to go there (and neither do you).

What's my point? The power of your thoughts. Do you see why the Bible warns us so much about the power of what we are thinking about? Over and over we're told to think about what we're thinking about. Especially here:

Be careful what you think because your thoughts run your life. Proverbs 4:23 (NCV)

Seems kind of extreme, doesn't it? My thoughts RUN my life? Really? Yeah, they do as it turns out. So be careful what you're thinking about. And more than that be careful what you think about what you're thinking about. Go ahead and read that again- I'll wait. Think about that sentence. It turns out what we tell ourselves about an experience isn't the big problem- it's what we tell ourselves about what we've told ourselves about an event and what we think it will mean and then we tell ourselves something about that and it can really ramp itself up into a place we should not take ourselves. A place filled with perceived monsters.

But the Bible says we have quite a bit of control over what we think about. I'm not here to say it's easy- it's not. Some of those strongholds entrenched deep within our minds- often in our subconscious- are powerful and not easy to root out. But the Bible tells us there is hope. With Jesus' help we can tear down those strongholds by regulating our thoughts. By putting a sort of guard shack at the entrance to our minds and taking every thought captive and making it submit to Jesus Himself. Over time we can really make a lot of progress when it comes to the deeply seated patterns that have dominated our psychology for most of our lives often without us even realizing what they are. But don't be surprised when they rear their ugly heads again even after we thought they had been dealt with once and for all because there are things that can stir those strongholds back up and plunge us back into the child-like fears and emotions that only those strongholds can stir up and we'll talk about that tomorrow but for today- just spend the day thinking about what you're thinking about. Don't try to do anything about it- just notice it and we'll talk Friday about how to let Jesus transform us in this area.

Thursday Reflection: Ok so we've talked about the fact that there are physiological and psychological components to anxiety that kind of predispose some of us to worry and others to not worry as much (maybe sometimes when they should be concerned but aren't). Today I want to look at the events that take place in our lives that will make us more likely to struggle with fear, anxiety and worry in our lives:

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? Psalm 121 (ESV)

Psalm 121 is a psalm for travelers. I have heard this verse quoted over and over in my lifetime. It shows up in songs, on posters, on mugs and tee shirts. But what does it mean? I always thought it meant that my help was going to come from the hills. But that's not what the typical Hebrew reader would have thought when they read this psalm. For the ancient Hebrew reader hills were obstacles. They were places of danger and a source of stress. Hills presented travelers with all sorts of problems. You could fall and hurt yourself. You could be attacked by wild animals or bandits. You could get lost and die from exposure.

No, this psalm is talking about somebody looking up and seeing all the problems or obstacles in their lives and asking themselves, "how am I going to survive this?" I'm going to go out on a limb and say you have been asking yourself that very question quite a bit over the last few days and weeks. And how much we struggle with worry, anxiety and fear is directly related to the severity of a given set of obstacles and events that crop up in our lives on a regular basis as we

journey through this world. In other words, life shaking events will cause us to worry on a scale that little else will. So cut yourself some slack (and the rest of the humans around you too) we're all facing life shaking events on a scale we probably never thought we'd see in our lifetimes.

For the first 18 years that I was a pastor at Riverside Community Church I had a relatively stable life. There wasn't a lot of upheaval and while nobody's life is pain free I had what I would look back on now as a charmed life. Sure, there were small things that I sometimes was tempted to worry about but nothing too earth shattering. During those 18 years I gave lessons on anxiety, worry and fear many times. I would talk about what the Bible said about how to handle our worries and while I couldn't really identify with people who struggled with those things I could still talk about the truths presented in the Bible.

But last August all that changed for me. I experienced a fairly traumatic event in my own life when my worship pastor, brother-in-law, next door neighbor and friend suddenly died (yes for those of you who don't know me- one person was all those things to me). I was touched by tragedy in a way I don't think I ever had been before and suddenly worry, anxiety and fear became a very real struggle for me. I worried about the church. I worried about myself. I worried about my sister who had lost a husband. I worried about my nephews and niece who had lost their dad. I worried about myself (yes I know... I said that twice- what can I say? I'm realizing just how self centered I really am and that worries me somewhat too which is kind of funny but then not so much either ;o)

Jeff died on August 13, 2017. On that first night I laid in bed and struggled with worry, fear and anxiety. I tried to remind myself of all those lessons I had taught on the subject. I tried to remind myself of all the scriptures I had read that talked about Jesus' advice on worry. I would love to say I handled it better than I would have imagined but the truth is I struggled. A lot. I don't know what I would have done without the support of my wife, my son, my sister, my sister-in-law and other family as well as the church family at Riverside.

What I learned over the next 9 months was that you don't just recite a memory verse and then not have to struggle any more- especially when the hills you lift your eyes and see are more like Mt. Everest than they are Baldy. But slowly as time has progressed and I got farther away from that day I was able to find ever increasing amounts of peace in my life and that was a pleasant surprise. I was finally a witness first-hand to God's ability to heal and comfort and bring His peace into lives floundering in worry, fear and anxiety. During the series on wisdom that I went through in 2018 I intended to talk about worry at least three times but each time I flinched. I put together three other outlines and was all set to talk about anxiety but on Friday night I scrapped all those other lessons and went with something else that was less... personal maybe? I was fascinated by my reaction- I was anxious about delivering a message about anxiety. I was worried to talk about worry. I was scared to talk about fear.

That was back in 2018. Then in 2019 I had my heart attack. Once again I found myself plunged into a world of worry, fear & anxiety. I feel like I handled that season better than my grief over Jeff's passing but I imagine that was partly because I had already gotten through 2018 and once I was over the initial shock of having a heart attack my doctors told me I should have no trouble recovering.

Now let's fast forward to today and let's all admit how we feel. Hi, I'm Ed and I'm very nervous about the future right now. I have a feeling you are too. And yet here I am talking about worry, fear and anxiety (or at least writing about it). Why? Because I think I'm ready to talk about it with you and I know I need the lessons of the Bible when it comes to fear of the future (by the time you read this I'll already have given the message last weekend so if you were there you'll have to judge for yourself whether I was truly ready or not or who knows? Maybe you'll be reading this and think, "hey! He talked about joy last weekend- not worry!" in which case you'll know now that I chickened out AGAIN ;o).

All that to say this- the mountains in our lives have a huge impact on how much we wrestle with worry, fear and anxiety. But they do not have to have the final say. Tomorrow we'll talk about God's part in all of this but for today I'll leave you with a scripture that's been a source of comfort for me these past few months and I look forward to when the picture will be a reality for me and not just a hope:

Fig trees may no longer bloom, or vineyards produce grapes; olive trees may be fruitless, and harvest time a failure; sheep pens may be empty, and cattle stalls vacant- but I will still celebrate because the Lord God saves me. Habakuk 3:17-18 (CEV)

Friday Reflection: Ok so now we know about 3 of the components that make worry, anxiety and fear more of a struggle in some lives than others which also explains why sometimes in our lives we struggle with worry more than others. So the next question is, what can be done? And that leads us to the fourth and final component of worry, stress and fear that we'll talk about this week- the transformational part. This is God's part. This is the part that God owns but even God can't transform us without our cooperation:

Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Romans 12:2 (NCV)

I used to think that God's transformational process was instantaneous. When He was ready He touched you it was like SHAZAM!!!! Suddenly you were transformed. But I'm not sure what made me think that. You certainly don't see that in the Bible. The folks in the Bible who were transformed were changed over a period of years. A lifetime really. We often wonder when God's going to "transform" us and I think if we asked Him He'd look down and say, "you're standing in it. It's happening right now and will continue for the rest of your life. Just keep being transformed by practicing what I'm teaching you." Ok, then how does He do it? How does God transform us?

According to Romans 12:2 He does it by "changing the way you think." And He does that by filling our minds with His words and thoughts. Over and over the Bible tells us that the key to success is to meditate or reflect on God's words. The more we do that the more transformation will occur in our lives and the more transformed we become the less worry, fear and anxiety will have power over our lives. Depending on the physiological, psychological and situational components that affect worry in your life transformation may never fully free you from anxiety and fear but transformation will allow you to live a life that is not defined by, dominated by or determined by worry, fear or anxiety. And transformation sees to it that worry, fear and anxiety will not have the final say in your life.

So what do you think God's words tell us to help free us from the power of worry? Well, it's strange. Pretty much the Bible tells us the reality of this world. That we live in a broken, sin infected world and that pain and suffering are going to be a part of it. Jesus put it this way:

I have told you these things so you can have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble, but be brave for I have defeated the world! John 16:33 (NCV)

Doesn't sound like the greatest pep talk of all time, does it? You're going to have plenty of trouble but I've told you so that you could also find peace in me. Why would knowing that trouble is coming bring me peace? Because humans are fascinating. When something goes wrong in our lives what's the first thing we ask? Why me or what did I do wrong? What Jesus is telling us here is that even if we could do everything exactly right (which nobody other than Jesus ever has been able to accomplish and even though He never did wrong He still had plenty of trouble in this world) we would still experience pain and suffering. Now when we go through it we won't have to spend a ton of energy asking questions that have no answer. Yes I have to endure trouble and heartache but I don't have to go through it alone. And because of Jesus' presence by my side I can defeat the world as well.

Over and over the Bible paints this picture of life. What's the forecast, Jackie? Well the forecast for your life is, trouble today, trouble tomorrow with loads of joy and meaning and peace and satisfaction interspersed in the midst of the trouble. I could include SO many scriptures from the New Testament that talk about the reality of pain in the life of Christians but I'll include this one for today. This is the verse Pastor Jeff quoted from memory on the day he died at the last worship service that he led at Riverside. I'll never forget that day. I was in the sound booth doing my thing while he led worship and he was giving his communion thought. I was listening to him but was also sort of multitasking and then he started quoting 2 Corinthians 4. I didn't think much about it until he just kept going. And then I looked up and was amazed at the amount of scripture he had committed to memory. This was the passage he quoted on the last day of his life:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you... Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:8-18 (NLT)

What was Jeff wanting us to see? What's Paul saying? The pain that seems so real to us is an illusion. It's a very compelling illusion but it will not last. The glory that is to come on the other hand is true reality. It's not the classic kind of hypnotism that we think of when we picture a guy with a top hat waving a pocket watch before our eyes saying, "you're getting drowsier and drowsier... you're under my control" but these passages of scripture are a form of hypnotism. Not mind control but a way of changing the minds of those of us who are seeking transformation. And they're everywhere in the New Testament:

I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our - not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below-indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39 (NLT)

For those of us who struggle with worry, anxiety and fear did you catch that part on the second line of that passage of scripture? What can separate me from God's love? "Not our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow". If you struggle with worry you need to hear this- no matter how tough this life is for you and no matter how much you struggle with anxiety IT CANNOT SEPARATE YOU FROM THE LOVE OF GOD THAT IS REVEALED IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD!!!!!! Let that sink in today. Let that change your mind and transform you. Reflect on that when you're floundering in worry and fear. And because nothing can separate us from Jesus then when we find ourselves struggling with anxiety and worry we are told to bring it confidently into the Throneroom of God and don't forget to leave it with Him when you go:

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Peter 1:7 (NIV)

Over the months following Jeff's death and during my recovery from my heart attack and over the last few weeks I will sometimes fall asleep repeating this verse over and over. Why? Because even if I try to "cast" my anxieties on Him and even if I try to leave them with Him in the Throneroom somehow those worries keep finding me. I'll pray and ask God to take my worries and anxieties and fears and then I'll roll over hoping to find sleep at last and guess what's there waiting for me? My worries are back! You'd think they'd wake Judy up but for some reason they don't (which trust me is best for all concerned ;o)

So when my worries find me again I just cast my anxieties on Him again and then repeat as necessary. I often fall asleep reciting 1 Peter 1:7 and other passages that comfort me in the midst of my own worries.

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me-everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:6-9 (NLT)

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command-be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:7-9 (NLT)

Like I said I often fall asleep reciting these words to myself over and over (but in order to do that I need to memorize passages of scripture so I can meditate on them when I don't have the Bible

opened right in front of me and believe me when I wake up at 4 AM with the fears for today and my worries about tomorrow I NEED to have these scriptures ready and in the chamber to crowd out and overwhelm the things I'm worried most about). And I can't think of a better way to fall asleep than in the presence of Jesus Himself surrounded by the words of His care and His love. NOTHING WILL SEPARATE ME FROM THE LOVE OF JESUS THAT IS REVEALED IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.

And what I've learned is this- even if I can't just make my worries or cares disappear at the snap of my fingers I am still being transformed day by day into the likeness of Jesus Himself as I let Him "change the way I think" by saturating my mind with His words. And in the end what that means is this- my worries, my anxieties and my fears do NOT define me. They will not determine the course of my life (even if they do bother me as I follow the path God sets before me) and they will never dominate my life. They will NOT have the final say and they will never separate me from Jesus' love. And I've come to learn that's better than anything I could have imagined on my own.

Do I know what will happen tomorrow with this virus and our government's reaction to it? Nope. But I know Who holds tomorrow in His hands. I want to choose to be defined by Him and not by my fears for today nor my worries about tomorrow.