

Worry, and Be Happy Too

By Dennis Payton Knight

Despite its obvious intent, the first time I heard the song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” it struck me as wrong, a negative way to ignore the realities of life, and the idea has worried me since the catchy tune came out. I’ve finally done some checking, and I am exonerated. You can worry and be happy, too.

Dr. Martin Rossman, author of *The Worry Solution*, wrote in a 2010 *Huffington Post* article, “Worry generally gets a bad rap in modern life. That’s because most of us don’t know how to worry well – using it to manage stress instead of letting it cause more stress.” He said, “Worry is a function of the human imagination, the most powerful force on earth, outside of God or nature.”

Worry was the force that discovered the Americas, put humans in space, and prompted us to decipher our genetic code. That is the good side of worry, and I declare it is why worry was invented in the first place.

Dr. Rossman addressed the bad side of worry, too. It can degrade from a problem-solving function into a bad habit through which we obsess about whatever we don’t want to have happen. He gives the example of a woman walking around her house all day, every day, for years, carrying a bundle of twigs. She had worn a knee-deep groove around the house until a curious neighbor finally questioned her obsession, to which she answered, “Why, I’m keeping the house safe from tigers.”

Worriers good and bad have influenced American history. Think of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton and Adams and all those other fine worriers of their day who challenged oppression from abroad, declared independence, created a nation that remains today a banner of liberty and justice, and crafted a constitution to preserve it.

But it isn’t a perfect union, and we have never been free of worry. That is a good thing. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, worried deeply about the conflict of abolishing slavery and preserving our union. That he accomplished both is a testament to the power of positive worry.

The Great Depression happened on the watch of Herbert Hoover who pooh-poohed the worries of a nation and promised prosperity was just around the corner. He might himself have written that stupid song. Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 amid the chaos, and he good-worried us out of the calamity, putting people to work with his New Deal and the vital programs that went with it.

It is an election year and we are not free of things to worry about now, either. Hunger, homelessness, terrorism, global warming, the environment, migration, the chasm between rich and poor. Some will vote for those who would carry twigs, wear a groove around our borders, and keep us safe from tigers, whistling all the while “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.”

But I will stay with the problem solvers. We will worry together, work together and be happy, too.