“Prayer, Gratitude and Contentment”
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I originally had a different plan for writing a sermon, but when I opened the news this week with more uncertainties going on in our world, my first thought was “not again. I just want a break.” How many times have not only myself, but millions of others, thought that throughout our lives? Many generations have felt this looming fear where they feel as though their time is the “end times”. Are these concerns really different this time, or is this a perpetual pattern that keeps happening, with threats changing, while having more access to global information?

These questions are not answerable with certainty, and looping on them without action is not going to make anything change except cause more flight-fight-freeze-fawn responses, resulting in being in a dysregulated state that makes us less likely to act and lean on God.

The term “fight or flight” is more commonly known than “fight-flight-freeze-fawn”. Freezing and fawning are other automatic responses our nervous system can have when there are perceived or real threats, they are not character defects. We all have them as a way to help us survive when we feel threatened. If you were confronted with a threat such as someone trying to hurt you, you may respond by physically fighting them or screaming to make yourself larger, flighting by running away from the situation and escaping, freezing where your body tenses up and you cannot move as a way of “playing dead”, or fawning where you try to appease the person and give into whatever they want in order to de-escalate them.

A study from this year by the American Psychological Association polled 2,200 Americans and found that 62% of them are somewhat or very anxious about world events, 62% about being able to pay bills or expenses, 60% from being able to keep themselves or their families safe, 55% concerned for their health, and 53% concerned for both climate change and emerging technology. 48% stated they were more anxious than the year before, a rise from 43% in 2025 (APA, 2026).

I am curious what those statistics would be for Quakers, given that we tend to be paying more attention to world events, climate change and social justice, while also having strong protective factors such as a sense of community, mindfulness and spirituality.

Fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses are responses to immediate perceived threats, but can happen much easier and be more intense when experiencing chronic, cumulative stress. Common responses to cumulative stress is to shut down, avoid conflict, engage in verbal or physical violence, be complacent or complicit. Many of these responses can impair our ability to help the challenges we face in life either on a global, national, familial, or individual scale.

Some broad and specific examples of fight responses include:

-Engaging in verbal hostility and exclusion
-Belittling and disparaging comments on social media

-Screaming or berating others during Thanksgiving over differences
-Engaging in physical altercations or threatening to fight someone
-Flipping people off or screaming back at them during protests

Flight responses may include:

-Willfully choosing to ignore integrity and safety concerns to continue to support our own narrative or comfort
-Choosing to not give any resources of time, energy, support or finances due to not wanting to acknowledge or sit with people who are suffering, such as homeless people or victims of war
-Turning off, unfollowing, or refusing to engage in information or conversations regarding distressing news
-Hyperfocusing on distractions or maladaptive strategies such as excessively working, binge eating, substance use, compulsive shopping, or excessive sleeping

Freeze responses can be very similar to flight. While flight responses are more driven by active escapism, freeze responses are driven by immobility

-Doomscrolling loops of staring at screens without being able to turn them off
-Procrastinating on needed tasks and responsibilities
-Blanking out during conversations
-Not engaging in action for change because it feels pointless or not knowing where to start

Fawn responses may look like:

-Avoiding hard conversations and conflict at the cost of authentic relationships and vulnerability
-Choosing people pleasing to not rock the boat, resulting in ignoring things that need to be changed
-Not stating your core values because of fears of being rejected by others
-Taking the side of the oppressor or authority figure to prevent backlash, or being silent during an injustice
-Apologizing for former stances taken due to need to be accepted, not because of a change of heart

Collective engagement in these behaviors has contributed to world hunger, war, abuse, poverty, bigotry and hate, homelessness, isolation, climate concerns, etc.

Quaker culture as a whole has been an active group of people who work at challenging the status quo and advocate to treat all living things as valuable. It’s not an easy thing to do. We are human and we get tired. We get anxious, depressed, angry, and avoidant. With being inundated with heavy news at a rate that is not sustainable, it is very easy to get into a place of fight-flight-freeze-fawn. Our bodies feel threatened and we can get into a perpetual state of conscious or unconscious anxiety that can impact our ability to live out our purpose. We know that inaction is not the answer, because faith without works is dead.

What are some ways to help us cope with the anxiety and allostatic stress load, and keep being aligned with our purpose for what God has for us?

For this message I am going to be focusing on a verse in Philippians 4. As someone with lived experience with OCD and generalized anxiety, I have always struggled with one of Paul's quotes in this verse: "Do not be anxious about anything", indicating that that is something I could choose. Telling someone "just don't be anxious" or "don't be sad" or "calm down" doesn't work, and can actually make things worse, driving us to fawn and suppress our emotions to not be an inconvenience to the people around us. Naming and acknowledging our emotions can be a great first step in healing. If you are struggling with a lot of stress and anxiety, I want to encourage and normalize that needing additional help from a therapist or medication prescriber is more than okay. I believe there are solid suggestions in this verse and sometimes we need more tools, consistency and accountability in practicing them, and nonjudgmental support from a professional.

Philippians 4:4-13 gives us helpful insight in managing our anxiety:

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

10 I rejoice] in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. 11 Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul, the writer of this verse, was not a "thoughts and prayers" alone figure. He was a man of action, so convicted by his beliefs that his actions of preaching the gospel of Christ in ways that contradicted the Roman empire, resulted in him being targeted and eventually killed. He spent approximately 5-6 years incarcerated throughout his ministry. When he wrote Philippians, he was on house arrest. He spent many years experiencing homelessness, assassination attempts, floggings, stonings, cold, hunger, and thirst. Yet he was able to find contentment and resiliency despite persecutions. What are some ways that Paul was able to find contentment in times of trouble?

Rejoice, pray, and express thankfulness.

There have been a lot of studies that show that prayer impacts our mental health. Some neuroscience studies have found “prayer activates areas of the brain associated with peace, focus, and relational bonding, while calming the body’s stress response” (Scalise, 2026). Another study found that prayer can impact people in negative or positive ways, depending on the way that they pray. Prayer focusing on requests, being in a negative mood state, and believing that God is impersonal can actually increase anxiety and depression, while prayer with positive emotions as well as praying with others can improve our mental health (Froese et. al., 2024). How do we come to terms with this, if we are already feeling anxious and Paul suggests we give requests to God for our anxiety?

By combining rejoicing and thankfulness with prayer, this may help improve our wellbeing. So much research has been done demonstrating the benefits of gratitude, and many therapists use this practice to help with managing depression and anxiety, myself included. Taking time to give thanks to God, exploring the what and whys of our gratitude, may boost our mood. Going back to the results of the study, praying while believing God is impersonal can cause negative effects. Paul asks us to reflect on rejoicing and remembering that God is *near*. If we come to God with our anxieties believing that God will be near us and express gratitude while doing so, we may be able to work through many challenges and anxieties that we face. We can lean on God’s presence and strength despite external circumstances, remembering that through Christ, all things are possible.

Meditate on what is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise.

There is a strong mind-body connection; ruminating on hopeless, discouraging, abusive, harmful information can make us feel substantially worse, and increase anxiety. If we start our day reading terrible news and obsessing about it, we might have an anxious-prone day. It is important to note that trying to suppress or “flight” these thoughts can also be harmful as they will keep coming back. Whatever you resist persists. If I tell you to not think of a pink elephant, you are going to think of a pink elephant. This verse does not say that focusing on good things means ignoring challenges and hardships, or pretending that everything is fine, resulting in inaction. What it does suggest is to reflect on good things. We can hold dichotomous truths that while there is a lot of harm going on, there’s also a lot of good. It can be easier to notice distressing content than it is to focus on what is going well. There are billions of people doing good things every day. One of my favorite quotes is from Mr. Rogers: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster’, I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers - so many caring people in this world.”

Show concern and gentleness towards others, doing what the Spirit leads you to do

Let Mr. Rogers' words inspire you to remember that not all hope is lost, even in the hardest times. Meditate on good to motivate you out of an anxiety response, and I encourage you to not just stay there. Be a helper. Paul states that the peace of God will be with you as you do the things you have learned and received. While Paul reported he could have found contentment in

all states of being, he was greatly blessed by receiving support and shown care and consideration by others. Prioritize gentleness and giving in a violence-influenced culture. If your inclination is to go into fight mode, it might be harder to be gentle, but this is something that can be practiced. A gentle answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1). Use anger to motivate you to act to fight injustices in non-violent but assertive ways, and find ways to decrease stress in your life, potentially having more boundaries in your external environment. Take a pause and temporarily remove yourself from an angering situation to regulate, and then come back if it is safe to do so, to respond rather than react.

Instead of “flighting” away from issues, allow yourself to have boundaries on when and how much you will consume, while giving yourself time and space to come back to issues that are important to you. None of us has the capacity to solve every issue that comes up, and the Spirit might not be calling you to give to that specific organization or respond to that certain request. Reflect on if there are areas of avoidance, and ways to be intentional to respond rather than react, giving yourself time for helping others and resting as God is putting on your heart.

If you find yourself freezing and immobilized, if possible, disconnect and remove yourself from what is giving you that response in the moment, and engage in intentional action that regulates your nervous system. Focus on encouraging news, express gratitude, meditate, reach out to loved ones, go for a walk, or find out ways you can make a difference in your community.

If you find yourself being rejected for standing up for your values, let them. In John 15 Jesus promised that people will hate you if you follow Him because they hated Him first. Remembering that trying to keep the peace in the sense of avoiding difficult conversations or not speaking out against injustices, aligning with the one in power and not the one victimized, can also be a form of violence. The rejection could still hurt, but I encourage you to do it anyway. Be mindful of what the Spirit wants you to say or don’t say, and follow this above fear. When you fall short, it’s never too late to apologize, change your stance, or try again. When you reflect on some of the most powerful world changers in history, they didn’t get there without criticism and rejection, and several have been martyred. You can’t stand up against an unjust system without being challenged by those who benefit from said system.

It is not easy to do the opposite of what your nervous system is telling you to do when you are stressed and worried. By leaning on the Spirit, being intentional with our words and actions, and meditating on thanksgiving and hopeful thoughts, we can experience contentment in all situations. We can live a life of purpose regardless of our external circumstances.

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