



Worry Dolls

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I WAS BORN A WORRIER. IT'S NOT ALL BAD. Scientists have identified a single nutrient in the human brain that intelligence and worry both deplete. Worry, researchers speculate, evolved as a survival mechanism, attuning humans to danger while intelligence developed to assess risk. Worry vexed me from childhood, but it also made me conscientious. About, say, deadlines.

For that reason, I brought work along on visits to friends—always on my business trips to California in the 2000s, when I would add on a few days with my longtime amiga, Lois. One afternoon she had to tend to a work crisis, and I agreed to watch her toddler. Being childless, I expected I would work on a client report while Michaela did whatever children do. But my report soon gave way to a heap of Crayola-colored paper, glue gun, glitter, scissors, and the determined trust of a five-year-old that we would partner on her art project.

I closed my laptop, and I moved my notes off the big, round table in the bay window. Outside, butter-yellow Lady Banks roses twined up the trellis under sky a startling Pacific-blue; the sky arched over a jungle-green yard where the family's black Lab snored. My eyes concentrated on a sheet of Mango Tango. Our project: headbands for Michaela's dolls.

From her perch across the table, the blonde toddler appraised my fingers as they guided pinkish shears. "You're really good," she observed.

Absurdly, pride flooded me. I abandoned myself to decorating thin strips of paper with

silver glitter and gold stars until—an hour later—we were ready for the fitting. Michaela offered me headband after headband, and one by one I measured and glued them on seven dolls with painstaking care.

"Let's line them up," I suggested. We arranged her dolls side by side on the sofa like chorus girls. We took a seat together on the facing ottoman. Beholding them, we celebrated our collaboration, clinking cups of herbal tea.

Those hours became the first in a tender queue of memories. Over the next fourteen years, my bond with Michaela matured as we discovered similarities. For example, she and I share the worry "gene." Statistically, it's not surprising. Research studies show that females are almost twice as likely to experience anxiety as males do. Creatives are also prone to disquiet, even full-blown panic. These emotions we both know well; I have been writing since I could pick up a pencil, and Michaela began dancing soon after she could walk. The keener the consciousness, it's been said, the greater the pain. Some talents have made worry pay off. Poet T. S. Eliot called anxiety "the handmaiden to creativity." British illustrator Gemma Correll draws poignant yet funny comics about the perils of chronic overthinking. And diverse artists—from Virginia Woolf to Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois to Janet Jackson—have turned anxiety into inspiration.

Another risk factor endangers this girl, forty-five years my junior. Today anxiety is the leading mental health issue among American youths. Between 2007 and 2012,

the National Survey on Children's Health documented a twenty percent increase in diagnoses of anxiety for children aged six to seventeen.

Some worry, of course, is natural; it's what scientists call evolutionary. Preschoolers, for example, tend to have nightmares because normal fears develop during these years when their imaginations are very active. Michaela was one. A few months after Operation Headband, she confided a recurrent nightmare: a wolf prowled around her home after dark.

"Mama closes the curtains so the wolf can't get in."

"Do you know what wolves are really afraid of?"

Her blue eyes widened, platinum curls shook. I extended my arms, flexed my biceps. "Strong women!"

She chortled, curling her tiny muscles too. "Strong women!"

Mantras like this one can help with anxiety, which the Mental Health Foundation defines as "an ongoing sense of worry without a specific cause." Compared to fear about a specific wolf, anything indeterminate can trigger pervasive worry. I used to feel that if worries were drifting by like milkweed, the downy seeds would catch on the brambles of my persistent angst—a reflexive habit that made me feel more vulnerable and alone.

As Michaela and her friends progressed through adolescence, they underwent the trials of that age without time-honored, communal rites of passage. Clinical psychologist and yoga therapist Bo Forbes writes, "The most important rituals and ceremonies of indigenous cultures take place during key life transitions." Chronic worriers need similar practices, he explains,

to face their fears instead of fleeing them. The process, contends this contemporary shaman of the psyche, is biological as well as spiritual and psychological. In humans, the autonomic nervous system mediates fear and anxiety through two pathways: the sympathetic (fight-flight-freeze), or the parasympathetic (rest-and-digest). The more we succumb to the first, we "wire in" that pattern more deeply until, Forbes says, "overdrive becomes our default mode."

It's a habit that can persist into adulthood. Anxiety disorders afflict eighteen percent of adults in the United States every year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Medications are often prescribed. Perhaps it is time to also revive ritual practices. Seventy years ago W. H. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for his dramatic poem "The Age of Anxiety," about four New Yorkers bemoaning how much their city had changed during World War II. Fast-forward to 2012, when a *New York Times* opinion piece by Daniel Smith asked, "It's Still the 'Age of Anxiety.' Or Is It?"

Michaela and her peers would answer "Yes." They have grown up in a volatile era. In 2018 her "wolves" included school shootings, animal slaughter, global warming, #MeToo, and a dysfunctional U.S. government. I worry about these issues as well, but daily practices I adopted ten years ago help keep at bay the wolf-pack of despair.

My mornings, for example, begin with walking prayer. I turned to it in desperation ten years ago when my mother's many grievances led me to distance myself from her; angry, she cut me off. Our long, bitter estrangement almost caused my mental breakdown. Harpy voices screeched in my head for hours (Bad Daughter! Bad Daughter! Bad Daughter!), and

I fled their clawing voices on daily *confessio peccati*, the penitential walk Catholics make to contemplate suffering. On these walks, I would subject myself wholly to my flagellating guilt, but only for ten minutes every day. Once each excruciating period of repentance concluded, I would force myself to focus on other—and others'—needs.

Two years of that discipline, plus dialogues with a compassionate therapist, hushed the Harpies. Since they withdrew their talons and slunk away, my walking prayer has become a way to welcome the day with gratitude for the abundance and resilience of my life. Customs can, of course, become mere habits. To guard against this tendency, I recall the Catholic parish of my childhood. The Angelus bells rang at noon every weekday, and we youngsters—gathered in the schoolyard—would recite the prayer the Angel Gabriel said when he appeared to Mary. At that same hour, the factory across the street would blast its whistle, followed by a rousing rendition of "Dixie." One day the church bells did not ring, but we fell to our knees at the first notes of "I wish I was in the land of cotton." Rushing outside, black cassock flying, Father O'Malley squawked, "Stop praying, boys and girls! Stop praying!"

Schoolyards, for Michaela, are relics of her past. As this lissome ballerina grew tall, her original passion evolved into zeal for acting and then film-making. In high school she won a scholarship to UCLA's Digital Filmmaking Summer Institute. Her short work about dancers was later screened at a film festival. Now she is immersed in the film studies program at the University of Greenwich in her father's homeland, England.

I'm thrilled for her, but this big transition worries me. A triple threat—being college-age, female, and artistic—dangles over

her. Case in point: The number of incoming freshmen surveyed by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute who report they "felt overwhelmed" by their responsibilities had risen to forty-one percent by 2016, an increase in anxiety mirrored by research studies at other institutions.

Females, already at greater risk for anxiety, are more fearful than ever before of sexual assault on campuses in the United States and the United Kingdom. In March 2018 the *Guardian* reported on a survey at 153 different U.K. institutions of higher education: Of 4,500 respondents, sixty-two percent of students and graduates have experienced sexual violence (from groping to rape), with eight percent of females saying they had been raped at university.

Michaela's chosen profession poses additional perils. What are the odds she will be preyed upon by a Harvey Weinstein? Or adopt the coping mechanisms so many young artists use? Ones that have led to too many variations on the headline Beloved Rock Star's Body Found.

Even if she has not worried about these possibilities yet, Michaela's anxiety has dollied in on the financial costs of a London university. In soft focus hover concerns about her future: Will she be able to find work that can pay her rent in that gilded capital, which last year ranked as the sixth most expensive city in the world? Will she find love? Will it last? If she wants children, will her partner agree? How will she juggle creative work and childrearing and worries about her aging parents, who live a continent away?

Luckily, she and others now have a champion who is helping people articulate their worries and desires about the present and navigate uncertainties about the future.

A Monument for the Anxious and Hopeful is the latest public art installation by urban planner turned conceptual visionary Candy Chang and writer James A. Reeves. It invites people to record their private anxieties and personal hopes on a collective wall. In the first three months of 2018, at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York, visitors posted over 13,000 statements. Beneath the header “I’m anxious because . . .”, scribblings ranged from idiosyncratic avowals—“my dad died and I’m afraid I’ll be sad forever”—to the political and spiritual. Responses to “I’m hopeful because . . .”, ranged just as broadly: “I’m ready to love again,” “people talk openly about mental health,” “multiple generations of women in my family have expressed that they feel empowered.”

Chang’s career began when she channeled her grief and reckoned with her doubts through public art projects. Expressed in her words, the process taught her that “when we feel fear, anxiety, or confusion, we often do our very best to hide it from others.” Her global project, *Before I Die*, was born in New Orleans in 2011 when she erected a blackboard over an abandoned house and stenciled in the words “Before I Die I Want to . . .” As people wrote their individual desires in colored chalk, they studied their neighbors’ dreams for the future. By 2018 communal dialogue through neighborhood chalkboards had promoted individual and collective resilience in more than 4,000 cities worldwide.

“In the past,” Chang told an interviewer in 2018, “there were many communal rituals” around grief, loss, and anxiety. She sees her public art as another expression of those traditional healing arts. Her words and work remind me of E. M. Forster’s epigraph “Only connect” in his novel *Howard’s End*. Published

in 1910 when the industrial revolution was changing Edwardian society in dramatic ways, Forster’s theme is just as relevant to our technological revolution: the importance of connecting the inner and outer life, of reaching beyond our individual struggles to other people, of transforming worries into energy that empowers us to take risks, act boldly and compassionately, and to grow. Another project by Chang and Reeves, called *Ritual Fields*, explores “the possibilities of ritual in an age of distraction and flux.”

Both artists thus inspired me to send Michaela off to university with a gift I received thirty years ago—one that soothed my anxiety until, over time, I internalized that practice. Some weeks ago, I unearthed a miniature Shaker box, abandoned for several years. I lifted the lid; seven worry dolls nestled inside. One by one, I laid the hand-made, half-inch Guatemalan figures in a row before me. In that culture, the dolls comfort sorrowful or brooding children; in contemporary play therapy, the dolls serve as “listeners” for troubled kids. My single file of dolls evoked memories: feeling strangled by worries, the motion of my hands loosening that noose, detaching me from turmoil. Now I saw how pinning each worry to a tiny doll helped it shrink in size; conversely, the process reassured me that I was, literally, bigger than my worries.

As I returned the dolls to the oval wooden box and prepared them for mailing, I imagined Michaela setting out the dolls in her room at Greenwich. I hoped the practice would give her a way to relate to her problems: help her work to the limits of her understanding and then live into what she doesn’t yet understand. Ripen her resilience. Make her strong. ❖