

A New Yorker cartoon depicts a “worry farm.” The farm is sectioned into fields dedicated to growing particular worries: unsettled issues, heirloom guilt, free-floating anxiety, jitters, old growth phobias, existential dread, small nagging fears, perennial doubts, and something called fantod. A fantod—I had to look it up—is a state or attack of uneasiness or unreasonableness.

The most fertile soil for a worry farm is uncertainty. The greater the uncertainty, the larger the harvest. We can tear down our old barns and build bigger ones; we can sing *Don't worry, be happy/Everything is going to be alright*; we can try therapy; we can take drugs, legal or otherwise; we can lose our minds; we can, in the words of John Denver:

*Blow up the TV throw away the paper
Go to the country, build a home
Plant a little garden, eat a lot of peaches
Try to find Jesus on our own.*

I recently heard a very accomplished New Testament scholar, engaged in the perennial pursuit of the historical Jesus, declare he no longer held out hope of finding certainty in his quest; he had given up such childish things. I guess we could, like the professor, learn to accept and live with uncertainty.

Peter counsels prayer: *cast all your worry upon God, because your affairs are of concern to him* (1 Peter 5 :7, Hart's translation). Peter, a fisherman, was familiar with casting nets into the sea, but how does one cast worries upon God? Worries are slippery than fish, not easily caught much less cast into the sea of God's forgetfulness.

Jesus, if not worried is at least concerned about what will happen following his death. Jesus prays for two things: to be gloried by God, and for those left behind to be one as he is one with God. Jesus did not want his work to be in vain, but his legacy—what the disciples and all succeeding generations did with the gospel entrusted to them—was beyond his control.

So he prayed. It seems Jesus' first prayer—to be glorified by God—was answered but his second one was not. He had a right to be worried about us being one as he is one with God.

Facing Jesus' departure, the disciples have their own worries. For them, completing Jesus' work meant putting an end to Roman occupation of Palestine. Jesus, ever tactful, tells them it is none of their business *when* the kingdom will be restored.

The disciples have to learn to live with uncertainty. Only God knows when, it is not for them to know. So, they return to Jerusalem, ascend to an upper room, and along with certain women, devote themselves to prayer. Thoughts of Jesus and prayer is what the disciples are left with to face an uncertain future.

Thoughts and prayers. The thoughts I think when I hear these words uttered as a shield against accountability are not fit to utter in church. Pretending prayer is only a passive exercise in piety and not a powerful force for agency has produced a bumper crop of worries. The old aphorism applies: the perversion of the best is the worst.

Prayer assumes faith in Another who is closer to us than our breath, who embraces us as certainly as the clothes we wear. We cry out from the depths of our being, believing our voices do not echo in the abyss but resonate in the depths of God. Even when our worries weigh heaviest, we are not alone, lost, ridiculous in the presence of nothingness but sustained in a presence we name holy.

Michelangelo's *David* has made headlines recently. Most people who visit the Academy in Florence are there to see this statue which presides at the end of a long gallery. A less famous series of sculptures by Michelangelo, *Slaves* or *Prisoners*, slot in along the side of the gallery.

At first they snag the attention more than command it. In contrast to *David's* shining prowess, they are rough and unfinished. Worry-worn and crumbling in despair of ever stepping free of the shackling stone, they remain forever incomplete.

According to ancient theory, the practice of sculpting has less to do with fashioning a figure of one's choosing than with being able to see in the stone the figure waiting to be liberated. The sculptor imposes nothing but only frees what is held captive in stone.

The work of prayer is something like this practice of sculpting. Prayer does not work by means of addition or acquisition, but by release, chiseling away thought-shackled illusions of powerlessness before the inevitable.

The work of prayer is liberation from whatever enslaves us. Prayer is a prying loose of the desire for certainty, a casting away of the need to have our life circumstances be a certain way in order to live well or be deeply happy.