



## Michael's Story: Worried to Death How Anxiety and Fear Can Be Stumbling Blocks

One minute I (Mike) was laughing and enjoying “boy’s night” with my son, the next I was pressing a cell phone tightly to my ear, motioning for quiet ... fighting back tears.

“I don’t think I’m going to make it,” whispered a raspy voice on the other end. “I’ve been in and out of the emergency room all week. This time they had to drain fluids out of my chest. I’m back home now, propped up on the couch. Tired. Just sitting here, waiting—”

It was my older brother Jerry. His voice was hoarse, his words labored. He was medicated again— heavily drugged.

Jerry had cancer.

He’d been battling it for nearly two years—twenty-four hellish months of blood tests, MRIs, CT scans, PET scans, simple X-rays, physical therapies. Poking. Probing. Jabbing. Injecting. There were constant visits with chemical oncologists, radiologists, pulmonologists; countless surgical procedures and thousands and thousands of dollars spent on drugs—some that appeared to do more harm than good, others that promised to be the “silver bullet” against cancer. Yet despite an all-out medical assault, my once robust brother was steadily withering away—turning into a listless, emaciated patient; a victim of a terminal illness.

I had to accept what I’ve tried hard to deny: Jerry was dying.

“I’m so sorry,” I spoke slowly and deliberately into the phone. The pizza parlor was loud and my connection was weak. “I’m so very sorry. I think you can beat this. You’ve fought so hard.”

“I’m tired, Mike ... very tired.” He paused, and then spoke again, a bit more reflective. “I’ve tried to do some good in this life, to help people, to be there for them—”

“Yes, you have. You’ve been there for me.”

“I don’t think I’m going to make it.”

“I’ll keep praying.”

“Pray. Yes—please do. And know that I love you. That’s why I called. I just wanted to tell you that”

“I love you, too.”

“I’ve got to hang up now ... got to go.”

“Good-bye, Jerry.”

“Good-bye.”

As my brother’s name faded from the screen, I stared at my phone in disbelief. *Is that it? Are those the last words I’ll ever say to him?*

I looked up and scanned the restaurant. So many smiling faces—couples and families; first dates and retirees. Just to my right, two middle-age men in ties were swilling beers and talking business. A grandmother was doting on a toddler to my left. Directly in front of me, a young man and woman were celebrating. *An anniversary? A pregnancy? A first home?*

Everyone all around me was laughing, toasting, talking ... living.

And then my gaze caught my son's eyes. Christopher had that deer-caught-in-headlights expression.

"Daddy, you're sad," my 10-year-old said. "Is everything okay?"

I forced a grin. "Yes. Things will be alright. Uncle Jerry is really sick today."

"He's always sick." Christopher picked up a slice of pepperoni and held it awkwardly. "Is he ... you know—"

"It's hard, but let's talk to Jesus about him. God knows just what to do."

"Okay, Daddy—okay."

## Immobilized by Worry and Fear

*Suddenly—in the midst of a life fresh and green and full of dreams—death intrudes. Your death. The real thing. Das ding an sich, as the Germans say: "The thing itself."<sup>1</sup>*

Walter Wangerin Jr. wrote those words in his book, *Letters From the Land of Cancer*. He, too, was fighting for his life and had a lot to say to victims ... and those who love them. Outwardly, I tried to smile and stay positive, but inside I felt as if my emotions were shattering into a million jagged pieces. Wangerin was helping me to understand ... to prepare.

*When we remain unprepared for the Ultimatum certainly to seize us, then the death that interrupts our daily lives is monstrous. Fight against it with all your might. Hate it. Be filled with envy and anger for those who are still healthy. Wail, plead, beg, make deals with friends and with the Infinite. Sink into despair. Lie down in hopelessness. Die, then—even before you die. Or else, prepare. Long before that final confrontation, prepare.<sup>2</sup>*

Surprisingly, Wangerin was helping me see how anxiety, worry, and fear had become my own cancer—spiritual stumbling blocks that are robbing my relationship with Jesus Christ. In a very real sense, I was allowing Jerry to slip away, even before he was gone; allowing myself to die, even before my life was over.

Anxiety, worry, and fear were robbing me of *life*.

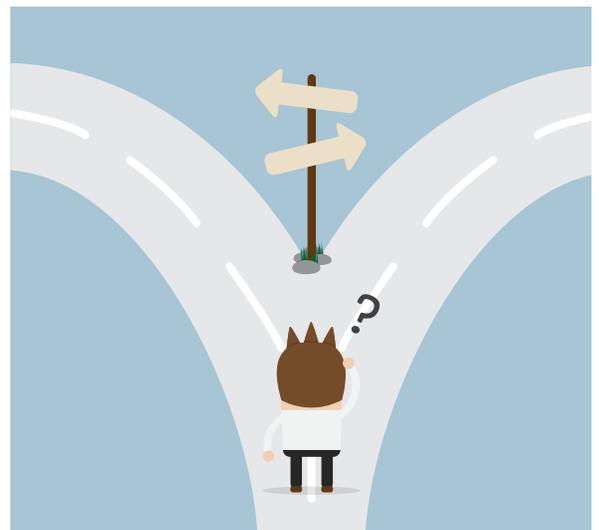
Here's how clinical psychologist Frank Freed, Ph.D., defines a love-fear-anger cycle that's at work in each of our lives:<sup>3</sup>

**LOVE:** moves toward a person, place, or thing

**FEAR:** moves away from a person, place, or thing

**ANGER:** moves against a person, place, or thing

When we keep taking a step forward (love) and then step backward (fear), we become immobilized and end up going nowhere. This leads to feelings of frustration, which are most often the basis of anger. And anger most often causes us to move against ourselves.



Sometimes I find myself caught up in this love-fear-anger cycle. In fact, I've traced it all the way back to my early childhood—right around the time when my father abandoned my family. (I was much younger than Christopher—just 6 when it happened.) And the cycle grew as I watched my mom worry her way through what must have felt like an impossible job: She had to raise six kids all by herself! I was the youngest ... and certainly the most high-maintenance of her children.

“Mrs. Ross, that boy of yours is such a worry-wart,” my first-grade teacher once told her during parent-teacher conferences. Then she grabbed my mom's hand. “Is everything okay at home? How are you holding up?” I held my breath—selfishly worried that Mom would say something that would make us—actually ME—seem different ... inferior. *Will my teacher stop liking us? Will the other kids think we're weird?* (As an adult, I've cut myself some slack. After all, first-graders aren't supposed to worry; they're supposed to have a childhood. Sadly, I didn't.)

Junior high was a nightmare. “Come on, Ross—don't be so scared of the ball,” barked Mr. Battle, my P.E. instructor. (Yep—his name was actually Battle, which ironically described the hell I endured day after day.) “Man up. Put some muscle into it.” During moments like that, I would have given anything to melt into the cracks on the gym floor. *Sorry, Mr. Battle, but I don't exactly feel much like a man. Most of the time, I just feel scared.*

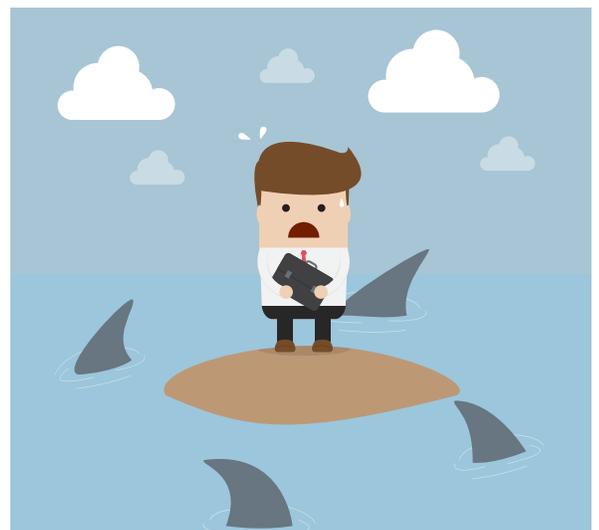
College was better. “This boy can write,” one of my professors told me—in front of a classroom filled with my peers. And then he proceeded to read something I had written. It was my first journalism assignment, and my professor was a hard-nosed newsman who seemed otherwise impossible to please. The affirmation built me up—until negative self-talk and the love-fear-anger cycle brought me down again. *But what kind of a future will I have? The competition is fierce among writers. And don't most of them starve?*

Marriage changed everything. “You know it's all going to be okay,” my wife, Tiffany, often tells me. “God's in control. Do you actually believe this? All the worry in the world isn't going to change a thing. It won't bring us more money, or make us more acceptable ... or cure a terminal illness. Can you take a faith step, and trust Him with the things that worry you? Can you trust Him enough to release all these fear traps?” Praise God for godly women! Praise God for life-mates we can lean on; lovers who gently nudge us back to the cross. *She really knows me—the person I am inside ... worry warts and all—yet she loves me anyway. I don't have to perform or mask my flaws. I am acceptable just as I am.*

I wish the kind of fear I struggle with was the amusement park variety.

You know—the type that merely plays with adrenaline, tickling our senses shortly after we buckle ourselves into a car on a roller coaster. We're usually pretty confident that nothing worse than losing our lunch is going to happen. And we're at least somewhat certain that the ride will be over in thirty seconds, gently delivering us to that long line we waited in for thirty minutes ... just to get scared! Amusement-park fear is a mere imitation of real, raw fear.

The types of emotions I've dealt with all these years relate to apprehension, worry, stress, and anxiety. They can range in severity from mere twinges of uneasiness to full-blown panic attacks marked by rapid heartbeat, trembling, sweating, queasiness, and terror. Sometimes these feelings are connected to everyday worries and strike out of the blue (called “free-floating anxiety”). Sometimes they are a bit more out of proportion, even unrealistic—and are triggered by specific



struggles (called “situational anxiety”). For example, the abandonment I experienced as a child makes me especially sensitive to issues of death and loss. So watching my brother endure a terminal illness is horribly painful for me. I love him. I don’t want him to suffer, and I certainly don’t want to lose him. And while death and loss are major stress-points for everyone, it is intensified in lives of those who battle anxiety.

“People who suffer from anxiety are especially prone to engage in fearful self-talk,” explains Edmund Bourne, Ph.D., who specializes in the treatment of anxiety disorders. “Anxiety can be generated on the spur of the moment by repeatedly making statement to yourself that begin with the two words: ‘what if.’”<sup>4</sup>

Yet God is teaching me to surrender anxiety, worry, and fear—and He is replacing them with faith. And a few practical steps are helping me along the way:

*Empathy.* My wife nudges me closer to God, and God nudges me deeper into His wisdom: “Trust the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”<sup>5</sup> And his wisdom is transformational.

*Positive Self-Talk.* When I begin to feel immobilized by catastrophic thoughts—“What if nobody likes me?” “What if I fail?” “What if I lose the ones I love?”—I neutralize fear with positive self-talk. For example, I might tell myself something like this:

*“Live, don’t live in fear.”*

*“Relax—and Trust God.”*

*“Believe in God’s truth, not the lies you are thinking.”*

*“Know that God is in control.”*

*“Be still and know that HE is God.”<sup>6</sup>*

*Prayer.* I usually have conversations with Jesus all throughout the day—as I drive, as I write, before I head into meetings, during prayer and Bible studies. I especially pray when anxiety, worry, and fear invade my thoughts. For me, this is the single most effective step. And when anxiety flairs up, my prayer may go something like this: “*Dear Jesus, I need Your strength, protection, and truth right now. You know what I’m feeling. Keep Satan away from me. Heal my heart; heal my mind. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*”

*God’s Word.* I use “spiritual interruptions” throughout the day to combat my struggles. As Scripture is worked into my life God begins speaking to me intimately—guiding me, changing me. There is a supernatural component to the Bible that no one can explain. It has to be experienced.<sup>7</sup>

*Empowerment.* Through the power of the Holy Spirit I am protected from the Enemy’s attacks. I don’t have to roll over and play dead. I can overcome anxiety, worry, fear ... and any other soul-robbing choice. The truth is, we all have a choice. We are responsible for how we feel and behave (barring physiological factors). It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.<sup>8</sup>

Control, though, isn’t easy to give up—especially in the face of a real crisis, not just an imagined one.

## **A Little Crisis Control, Please!**

My wife and I, like most people, can recall exactly where we were when we heard that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center towers. Even though the first crash was news worthy, the story really caught our attention when the second plane hit. All of a sudden, we were thrown into a crisis. What was going on? What were we supposed to do? We looked at each other and felt very confused, scared, even a little angry. Everything seemed to stop as we—and millions of others—watched live coverage of innocent victims fighting for their lives. There was mass confusion as panic set in. Thousands were faced with split-second decisions: *Should I stay where I am or try the fire escape? Should I run for cover here or over there? Should I help someone else—or should I just run for my life?*

Meanwhile, our nation's leaders were faced with defending our country from any further attacks. *Should we ground all flights? What action should we take if a commercial jet isn't responding properly?*

Before we knew it, all reliable cell phones weren't working. The FAA couldn't account for several airplanes. The Pentagon, the hub of our nation's military and intelligence, had been hit. A plane was down in Pennsylvania, the stock market ceased and rescue workers found themselves defending their own lives.

Fortunately, several things also went right that day. Our leadership remained safe, our government functioned, the military performed effectively, and people throughout the world came to our aid. But the moment of horror left me a little more than shaken. My sense of security had taken a blow. It was hard to catch up with how quickly my world was changing. And suddenly, it was as if a mirror had been held up to my life: I was making two of the same mistakes that people have made through the ages.

**ERROR No. 1: I Believed That Life Was *Within My Control*.** From the beginning of time, mankind has wanted to be the center of the universe. Think back to our discussion in Chapter 1. The root of the love-fear-anger cycle—and the stumbling blocks of anxiety, worry, and fear—started with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God told the world's first couple that He would decide what was right and wrong, not them. All they had to do was live as if God's view of good and evil was the right view. And that should have been easy, because God's view is the right view.

Consider people who came later: Joseph, for example (see Genesis 37-50). He was not in control of circumstances, but he was in control of his own behavior. And because he behaved as if God Himself was in control, Joseph was able to participate in the amazing work God accomplished, and to experience the joy that this work produced.<sup>9</sup>

**ERROR No. 2: I, Too, Often Fear That Maybe Life Is Spinning *Out of Control*.** In the midst of chaos there is a strong temptation to believe that no one is in control, and this naturally induces fear. After all, just stop and think about all the things that could go wrong today—everything from nuclear accidents to traffic accidents, from scalding coffee to global warming. From too many carbs to killer bees. It's scary out there!

## So Who's Really in Control?

To this day, I can remember how everyone from news anchors to school children were offering up prayers for the victims and their families. And for a few days, the President didn't receive criticism for using the name God. Churches were full and ministers worked overtime to respond to those in need. When all else failed—people turned to God. Some came in anger and some in confusion, but most of us came with a cry for help.

As my wife reminds me, it all boils down to an issue of trust. *Who, or what, do I run to when the going gets tough—when I give into fearful thinking and all those “what if” scenarios?* My trust is often misplaced when I depend more heavily on human knowledge and ability than in my Creator. Yet I know that our God is jealous.

He has helped us develop the many comforts of modern life, but He does not want them to become a substitute for our trust in Him. What will it take to get our attention? God longs for us to come to Him every day.

I don't want to wait until I'm forced out of my comfort zone again to lean on Christ. So I'm striving to consistently let go and trust Him in every situation. Believe me, I'm not always successful. Too often pride and fear get in the way. Thankfully, our Lord is strong—and very, very patient.

And there's so much that He is teaching me:

***I can TRUST God in the midst of a crisis.*** What's more, I'm discovering that I can find comfort in the

fact that I'm not the one in control. I'm beginning to lean on an old, familiar truth: " 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Psalm 46:10-11).

***I can TRUST that He has not abandoned me.*** In times of distress I can call out to Him and He will give me the power of the Holy Spirit. He will help me to handle whatever it is that I must face.

### ***I Can TRUST His Word When Life Feels Out of Control:***

- Nahum 1:7—“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.”
- 1 Peter 3:18 —“For Christ died for sins once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”
- John 3:16— “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
- John 20:21-22— “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”
- 1 John 5:3-4— “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world.”

## **An Unexpected Phone Call**

*Stable. My tumors sleep. The earth turns. My Lord is near. I am quiet here—and stable.*<sup>10</sup>

It was June 2012—a Tuesday ... a few days after Father's Day. My cell phone rang and Jerry's name flashed on the screen. I paused for a moment, savoring each letter of his name. And then I pressed “accept.” But before I could say “hello”—

“Michael,” a voice interrupted. “It's your brother.” Oh, that raspy voice that I love so much. It was still labored, but a little less medicated. He continued: “I just wanted to wish you a late, ‘Happy Father's Day.’”

A big smile stretched across my face. Imagine that: My brother is terribly sick, and yet he calls me. He's not giving up, but instead he's *living* ... celebrating every precious, God-given breath he's been given.

“Happy Father's Day to you, my brother,” I said to him. “Has your son been over to see you?”

“Oh—all the time. He's been so good to me!”

“I wish I could be there with you. I wish we didn't have three states between us.”

“It's all good, Mike ... it's all good. Give Tiffany and Christopher a hug. And give yourself one, too. I love you brother.”

“I love you, too.”

“Good-bye for now. ...”

Then the Angel showed me Water-of-Life River, crystal bright. It flowed from the Throne of God and the Lamb, right down the middle of the street. The Tree of Life was planted on each side of the River, producing twelve kinds of fruit, a ripe fruit each month. The leaves of the Tree are for healing the nations. Never again will anything be cursed. The Throne of God and of the Lamb is at the center. His servants will offer God service—worshiping, they'll look on his face, their foreheads mirroring God. Never again will there be any night. No one will need lamplight or sunlight. The shining of God, the Master, is all the light anyone needs. And they will rule with him age after age after age.<sup>11</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Walter Wangerin Jr., *Letters From the Land of Cancer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2010), 42.
- 2 Ibid., 43.
- 3 Frank Freed, Ph.D., *Breaking Free When You're Feeling Trapped* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, © 1997), 46.
- 4 Edmund Bourne, Ph.D., *Coping with Anxiety* (Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., © 2003), 44.
- 5 Proverbs 3:5
- 6 See Psalm 46:10.
- 7 See 2 Timothy 3:14-17 and Hebrews 4:12-13.
- 8 See Bourne, 44.
- 9 See Alex McFarland, *Stand: Seeking the Way of God—Genesis 37-47*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, © 2009), 34-35,
- 10 Wangerin, 199.
- 11 Revelation 22:1-5, *The Message*.