

UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH ANXIETY - ROLLO MAY

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It has been said that we live in an age of anxiety in which individuals are crippled by feelings of uncertainty and fear, but in this conversation Rollo May, correspondent Clare Gains hears a more positive view. Dr May concentrates on the benefit we derive from experiencing normal amounts of anxiety

CG - Dr May, in 1950 you said we live in an age of anxiety and that few if any of us ever escape the need to confront and deal with it in some manner. At that time you noted in your book *The Meaning of Anxiety* that only two attempts had been made in book form one by Freud and in an essay by Kierkegaard to present an objective picture of anxiety and to indicate ways of dealing with it. We are now talking over a quarter of a century later and I'm wondering now has the picture changed about our knowledge of anxiety and with our ability to manage it?

RM - Well, the picture has changed certainly and a great deal has been written - 6000 studies have been done for PhDs and other purposes - and the word is generally accepted in all aspects of our culture. But the problem is that we have not yet come to an understanding of the theory of anxiety. We bandy the word about and we talk about it but most of these studies are really not about anxiety at all, they are about some isolated segment of reaction that I would not call anxiety at all. They are about stress often - they are very rarely about anxiety itself. The subject of anxiety if we take anxiety simply as its own area - this scares people and everybody has dodged it not as they did before 1950 which means they didn't write or think at all about it, but since then they dodge it in the sense that they don't want to face the inner subjective aspects of anxiety.

CG- OK, you mention stress and that people sometimes confuse and perhaps use the term stress and anxiety interchangeably. I gather then that you feel that there is a distinction to be made between the two.

RM - Oh, I think there's a great distinction. I think it's a great error to identify stress with anxiety. Anxiety differs from stress in that anxiety is first of all a subjective reaction, it's an inner state of conflict with oneself and the fact that someday one is going to die. And this cannot be put outside oneself even though people try very hard to do so. I think stress and anxiety cannot be identified with each other because sometimes in stress we don't have any anxiety at all and I think there's a tendency in America to identify stress with anxiety because all anxiety experiences simply stress. It is an escape from the problem of anxiety. I think it's very important to remember that anxiety is essentially our feeling of the awareness of death. All of us realize that although we are all now alive, ultimately we will die. Even though we are not anywhere near death at the present moment, this comes out in many different ways in life, it comes out in the loss of love, which is a partial death, it comes out when you write a book that turns out not to be publishable or to be a success, when something is not as good as you hoped. All of these things are

partial deaths that precede our ultimate death. Now that may sound very pessimistic, but it's not at all. It is what keeps us alert and alive. It's the struggle with this dilemma of being alive but someday we will be dead that gives life zest, and helps us to make the most of it, that gives us our energy to put into it. And that's why I define anxiety as the struggle of being against non-being. Now we are a part of being and ultimately we will be absorbed into non-being. Anxiety stimulates us, it keeps us alive, it keeps us sensitive to each other and in general it gives a great deal of zest to a life that otherwise would be dead.

CG - So you're saying Dr May that a certain amount of anxiety is essential for well being.

RM -Yes, I'm saying that exactly. Anxiety is inescapable, anxiety is a part of all our lives. Anxiety is the source of all creativity. You don't paint a great picture lying on the couch having an afternoon nap. You paint a great picture by struggle, by throwing yourself into it, but the fact we are human beings that we learn to think and to talk. This is a result of our original anxiety as cavemen, cave people, in our struggles against the animals, who were stronger and had sharper claws than we had and out of this anxiety, this inadequacy of human life there came the capacity to think which we were forced to have, and we were forced to develop the capacity to talk and this is the beginning of human civilisation. Without anxiety we would not be able to have the civilisation we now have.

CG - OK, now the problem for contemporary Western civilisation with regard to anxiety was set during the renaissance. The belief that the 20th century is permeated by considerable anxiety is a notion espoused by theologians, philosophers, psychologists alike and all seem to agree that underlying it are profound cultural challenges. First of all, is Anxiety experienced differently in the 20th century from past historical eras and second How do you account for the quantity of anxiety in present day life.

RM - Well, we are living in an age of anxiety and this age is different from the previous 4 centuries. We are at the end of the period that began with the Renaissance. The symbols that worked so well after the renaissance, such as rationalism and individualism, now are defunct, they no longer work for our society. Now what this does is to throw everyone on their own. The old values no longer suffice to live by for example, the values of marriage are changing rapidly, the value of economic competition is changing rapidly, our whole society is in the process of radical change. And this is not just because of technology. Technology is a symptom and a symptom of this rather than the cause. And the cause is that we are at the last end of a dying age that began at the renaissance. Now at this time when everybody is thrown on their own, everyone has to seek within themselves some new values, some new standards, then this becomes the age of psychology. Psychology has burgeoned today, there are university courses, graduate schools, everyone reads about psychology when it was scarcely known as a discipline back in the 1900s. The reason it has burgeoned are simply that the standards of our age have gone to pieces and we have to find new standards within ourselves. Anxiety then is a symptom and symbol that we are in transition, knowing that we can't go back to the

19th century and not knowing what the 21st century holds . And in this gap between the ages we find ourselves in anxiety

CG - Lets distinguish if we may between different kinds of anxiety. You mention in your book that there's normal anxiety, that which is normal and neurotic anxiety? What are the differences between the two?

RM - Well, normal anxiety is the anxiety we all have. The anxiety of our day to day existence, the anxiety that goes with our love for other people and this is appropriate to the situation. We are anxious about the atom bomb, about war, losing love, pollution and these sort of problems. And secondly it doesn't require repression, we don't have to block it off into our unconscious, and thirdly normal anxiety can be used creatively, it can be directed towards new discoveries in life, and new creative possibilities and also normal anxiety does not leads to symptoms. Heart trouble, gastric symptoms, and all these sort of symptoms come not from normal anxiety, this is the difference between anxiety and stress incidentally also, they come from repressed anxiety - anxiety you don't face. This is what leads most of all to heart attacks. Now, neurotic anxiety on the other hand is anxiety that is not appropriate to the threat, that is suppose one is afraid that ones child is going to get run over by a car, that would be normal anxiety and one teaches the child not to run across the street against the lights and so on, whereas neurotic anxiety would be demonstrated by the person that always keeps the child indoors because of that fear and this of course makes the situation all the worse. Neurotic anxiety is not appropriate to the situation, it requires repression, you have to block off real aspects of what you're worried about and thirdly, its what leads to symptoms like physiological, psychosomatic symptoms and fourth it does not lead to creative activity. Now, the normal anxiety that we were talking about is the anxiety that everyone feels and all of us need to be aware of, to face constructively and to use creatively as the cave man used it originally to develop the power to think and therefore to survive in the conflict with the animals. And this is what i am hoping that this is what we will be able to do in our century

CG - You mentioned that anxiety and neurotic anxiety in particular is related to inner conflict. I'm wondering what cause the conflict?

RM - I think the conflict that causes anxiety is the conflict between where I we are now the present reality and our expectations. And this presents us all with a gap. If the gap is too great, lets say I'm a high school student and I want tomorrow to be an opera singer, that gap is too great for me to leap and then I get into problems of neurotic anxiety. But if the gap is not enough then I lead a bored life, a conformist life, and thereby my life lacks zest. This gap between the present reality and the expectations is the gap, out of which creative endeavours come, our creativity, this is when we plan for the future, this is where get visions, of beautiful works of art that we create, where we get new ideas about building new buildings , about creative new businesses. All this eruption of creative possibilities comes out of this gap. And if the gap is too great we have conflict which leads to neurotic anxiety, If the gap isn't great enough, if you live without any conflict at all, I think you also are in trouble because your life then has no propulsion, there's no place to go. Anxiety means

there's possibility. In possibility comes our freedom. And freedom is the human spirit. If we live in a world where there's no anxiety there will be no human spirit either. Now I want to emphasise very strongly that anxiety is always a sign of a new possibility or a possibility that is beckoning. And this anxiety comes out of the unrealised possibility so it means that what we should do with our anxiety it to ask ourselves what does it mean in terms of new things that we could accomplish, for some of us it certainly means new jobs, we should consider for example the anxiety of bringing up new children, it also means that there's a possibility, that the relation with our children can become more happier, more productive, for ourselves and our children. All of these possibilities pop up in our mind along with anxiety. Anxiety is the propulsion, the propellant lets ay that moves us towards the possible solution of these possibilities, to bring these possibilities into actualisation

CG - Lets talk a little if we may about fear and anxiety. Conditioning theorists s equate fear with anxiety and you've taken issue with this point of view. What is your point of view?

RM - Yes equating anxiety with fear is to really miss the whole point. Conditioning theorists find it almost impossible to deal with anxiety because it has so strongly a subjective frame of reference, a different reference for every human being that experiences it. No I say that fear and anxiety have to be distinguished from each other and I would say that the first emotion, the first experience of feeling that the infant has as soon as it is born or perhaps even in the foetus is that of starving. And after that perhaps a few weeks or months after comes a feeling of anxiety, and its only later when the baby, now a growing infant is able to distinguish exactly what it is that he is anxious about or afraid of. It is only then that fear emerges. Fear is the last the in the development of these protective emotions

CG - Anxiety comes before fear developmentally. Does it produce the fear or how does the fear originate?

RM - Fear comes out of objectified anxiety. Anxiety is both subjective and objective. We objectify the objective aspects as in 'I'm afraid the dog will bite me', and this then becomes fear the objective form of anxiety.

CG - Most of the significant data on anxiety comes from psychotherapists, people like Freud, Rank, Adler, Sullivan and others. However most psychoanalytic theory have emphasised the repression of sex and aggression as causing anxiety. How do you account for this emphasis?

RM - Well I think that repression of sex as cause of anxiety, which was at least Freud's first theory of anxiety. I think this occurred because Freud lived in a culture where sex was widely repressed and therefore carried the freight for many other problems in the Victorian culture, but this is no longer the case, the repression of sex will therefore now rarely exist and certainly cannot and does not cause the widespread anxiety. In our country for example the general population is more anxious now than over the past decade of so than they were back in the 1920s, and in the 1920s there was much more repression of sex, so how is this, that there is

more anxiety and less repression of sex? Well I think it occurs precisely because anxiety does not come from only that repression. It comes also out of the failure to face death, it comes out of the failure to be creative, it comes out of our anxiety about atomic power, so that it can be the blocking of any vital drive that blocks some possibility in life and this leads to anxiety and not centrally sex.

CG -Spiegelberger's research suggests that anxiety proneness has its roots in maternal rejection. Did your study of unmarried mothers yield similar results? Is there first of all an anxiety prone individual? And if so does anxiety proneness have its roots in maternal rejection?

RM - I don't like the term anxiety proneness because it simply seems to me that some people have more anxiety than others and it so happens that the creative individuals have more anxiety and the more intelligent students also have more anxiety than the less intelligent students. This means that if you don't want any more anxiety, get rid of all your intelligence and your creativity which would be a very dull life for all of us. No I'm not advocating what Spiegelberger means by anxiety proneness. I think that he has done some very good work in this field but I do think that what can't be overlooked is the fact that anxiety shows new possibility and creative people and intelligent people have more new possibilities than non intelligent and non creative people. No I don't think its a question of proneness, I think its a question of how much you open yourself to your own possibilities and in this sense the artist Giacometti was a very anxious person but he turned this anxiety into highly creative work and I think anxiety is absolutely necessary in leaders.

CG - Do individuals who have experienced rejection by their parents have a greater predisposition to neurotic anxiety than others?

RM - Yes , the middle class children do, that's what's terribly important. And the degree of security and trust is necessary in early childhood to give the child the basis for believing that he can live in this world and make something out of this world, and that he can have standards that are going to be dependable in this world. Rejection does increase the possibility of anxiety in middle class people, but at the same time it may be that these anxious people may turn out to be more creative. The artist may have been more rejected as a child, but all this is by the way because the important question is can the person use their anxiety to create new gifts for civilisation no matter where that anxiety comes from. for example In the book I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, this girl who had a very active imagination, could not communicate with her parents and couldn't feel at home in her world, and she became schizophrenic and then she created all these myths of imaginary spirits that she could talk with and did talk with. Now she later became an important novelist. The same imagination that had to be used and was used to create these mythic spirits with whom she could communicate, the same imagination could then be transferred into the creation of art and the creation of novels or poems. This is an example of the creative use and this occurred actually in her psychotherapy . Now where the anxiety comes from I don't think is a question that helps us. We know that it comes out of the gap between where I am and where I

want to be and we know that rejected children have a greater reason for not wanting to be where they are, the world is not very good to them and they long and they hope for new possibilities and many of them throw themselves into the effort to achieve these new possibilities and that may be the really creative artist or the really creative diplomat

CG - Can we turn if we may to the psychosomatic aspects of anxiety. Felix Deutsch once remarked that every disease in an anxiety disease. Do you see anxiety as a component of every disease?

RM - Yes I think anxiety is the subjective component. the objective component is the germ, the broken arm or whatever goes wrong with my body . But what he means is that when the individual is burdened with anxiety over a long period of time and he feels he cant do anything about it , then he may develop not only physical tension but he may develop physical symptoms - they may be heart palpitations or gastric ulcers or some other kind of physical symptom. But also the physical symptom itself lets say if he gets TB , there is anxiety involved in getting sick with TB but there is also anxiety involved in that you are now ill and you cannot cope with the world as it is about you. So anxiety appears both as part of the cause as a part of the illness in a psychosomatic sense, but it appears also as a part of the effect of the psychosomatic illness.

CG - We're also saying that anxiety serves a function of protecting the individual. What determines whether a person is able to resolve his conflict consciously or whether he will manifest symptoms. What is it that makes one person resolve it consciously and another person develop a symptom in order to deal with it

RM - Well one of the things that determines this is whether the person has learnt that anxiety is unavoidable in life. This kind of person who sees, as Kierkegaard says, that its important to experience anxiety not in order to be overcome by it but rather so you don't go to perdition , he said, by virtue of because of never having experienced the anxiety. Anxiety is something one can practice that I am aware that I have anxiety and I can therefore not be upset when it occurs. What is wrong when facing anxiety is that we go through life in a dream and only in a dream We think it ought to be like Hollywood, everyone should get married and live happily ever after and that there are no real insoluble conflicts - this phrase, Everyday and in everyday things are getting better, I regard as the most damaging attitude towards anxiety. a person can meet his anxiety much better if he is aware that some anxiety is inescapable, there will be anxiety every day and that he should so far as he can learn to accept the anxiety creating situations. For example shyness, shyness is a problem that we all have to a greater of a lesser degree, shyness is a form of anxiety. Now it is best that we become aware that everybody is more or less shy and the other person is probably about as shy as you are even though he or she can hide it or not let it show. If we are aware that shyness is a common ailment and always occurs when people are put into new social situations then we can meet our shyness, we can accept it and we can not cause it to stand in our way. We can go

up to speak to the other person regardless of our shyness and in this sense our awareness that one has been anxious and will be anxious in the future can be turned to valuable use. One's anxiety then can be like the racehorse at the gate and help one live more zestfully.

CG - So in a sense then, I think you're saying that it's critical that in terms of learning to use anxiety and manage it constructively that we begin to acknowledge its existence, look at it here and it's not going to go away and it may show itself in different forms, there has to be a basic willingness to accept the reality that we are going to feel anxiety

RM - Yes. Let me say I was always anxious before I give a speech, but then one day I thought of myself as foolish to always have this tension and anxiety before I go on the stage so I conditioned myself out of it and that night I went on the stage and I was completely calm and poised and I gave a rotten speech. Now what was lacking was the zest, the stimulation and tension that can go into creative thinking, the tension that can make one think ideas that are even better than one ever thought before when one is in the process of giving a speech. Now this is what I mean by a constructive use of anxiety

CG - You said in your book *The Meaning of Anxiety*, the kinds of threats that cue off an individual's anxiety are conditioned by the standards and values of the culture. What kinds of threats cue off anxiety in our culture?

RM - Well in our culture the threat of getting old does cue off anxiety in people. You see in our culture we worship youth, and we hang on to the image of remaining young for ever, we don't value the wisdom of older people. I think that's a great mistake. And when we become more understanding of the wisdom that old people have to contribute then there will be less anxiety about getting old. There's a great deal of anxiety in this country also economically, inflation. This causes a tremendous amount of anxiety. People feel helpless in the face of it, what can you do? All you know is that you're cornered and that's a very serious threat and it leads to very serious anxiety. The atom bomb also hovers over us like a great nemesis. All these problems we now face, it's no wonder that this is an anxious age because all these things - overpopulation, pollution - are going on all at once. We just about have to block some off. Now these things are all symptoms of what makes this an anxious age and I think that what we must do as far as we can is to shift our thinking from simply worrying about these different problems to the questions of what can we do about them? The point is to turn your anxiety into active affect, to overcome the situation. Whether or not you succeed in overcoming the problem you will certainly have succeeded in using your anxiety constructively

CG - OK we've said that anxiety has at least one purpose, to protect us from what we believe to be dangerous. And that although it cannot be avoided except at the price of numbing one's sensibilities, it can be reduced. Can you talk some more

about the management of anxiety, how it can be used constructively, Can you give the listeners some ideas of what can be done to reduce the anxiety and deal with it more creatively

RM - Yes well I'd certainly be glad to try to do that. One of the changes that is occurring is the less emphasis upon getting ahead of the next person, the competitive individualism in our work which has been a great cause of anxiety earlier in the 20th century and the century since the renaissance. The young people have taught us its not about the money you make on the job. They may make a great deal of money in the process but you lose your soul. Rather it is the meaning of the job for you. In this sense it is the young people of the 60's have made a very important contribution. I think that each of us has to ask themselves if he is concerned with managing his own anxiety, what is the function and purpose of my life? Does he live only as a routine, doing the same thing over and over again each day in which case his anxiety will be unmanaged and give him some real problems or does he see his life as a way of contributing something, or creating something that will be of genuine interest to him and of genuine interest to other people. Now the latter is part of a way of managing anxiety. Your life becomes more of what you want it to be and therefore you can channel your anxiety into creative activities rather than simply holding off the sense of despair and loss of being. Now community is another very important thing we are learning these days, that if you can not only make friends but joining communities, communities of young people, women's consciousness raising groups, men's consciousness raising groups, one of these groups of communities in which people can actually live together not in the sense of competition, but in the sense of supporting each other, these are ways of constructively managing your anxiety and sharing with your fellow human beings who happen to live around you.

CG - How is interpersonal community developed and integrated with the values of individual self realisation. How does one do both? Can it be done or are the two at times at odds with each other

RM - Well the two are at times at odds with one another. They don't have to be all the time. The problem with our society was that if I got ahead then you got behind. If I get a good grade then it means someone else gets a bad grade and I think this is vicious and harmful and produces neurotic anxiety of a very destructive nature. Now this is not necessary. We need ways to develop ways in which you and I can do our work as a contribution to others rather than an undermining of others. We can do our work as a gift to others. Now if you look at the arts, someone paints a beautiful picture, and this helps others to paint beautiful pictures rather than putting them down. Art is non competitive, even though individual artists may be, still the great treasures that Michaelangelo, Dante, Shakespeare gave to us now give pleasure to every human being. The qualitative aspects of the humanities and arts by and large are the non-competitive aspects and these help us to meet our problems in a way that is good for the community, rather than good for us at the price of the community's laws.

CG - One final question Dr May. Lets prognosticate if we may about the future. As we approach the end of the 20th century, what do you see happening. Will anxiety continue to escalate, will there be greater and greater numbers of people who face anxiety daily or will we learn to deal with our anxiety and manage it more constructively

RM - Well I think the latter. Certainly I think we're in for hard times for a while yet , but then I think we must have some kind of new renaissance, some kind of new birth of a society that will have equality for women and a society that will have equality for races of whatever colour. Now the new renaissance will not be based upon the myths and symbols of the renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries but rather it will be based upon new symbols, the symbol of one world, the symbol of planetism, the symbol of interrelationship of the various countries in the world. this has to be understood politically. And I think we are being pushed towards this by the historical developments that are a great problem to us like Oil. We're all going to be short of energy products in the next 15 or 20 years and we'll just have to reorganise our world as a greater community a more constructive community that we have in the past. Now I look forward to that , and I look forward to the anxiety being used constructively as it will need to be if we're to be reborn or even if it was to survive. Otherwise I think I think we are in for an even greater new and general holocaust .

CG - I think we're going to need to do some planning. Thank you Dr May.