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What, Me Worry?

March 1967

The following morning, Hal's Jeep rambled noisily down the mountain highway, heading back to Davis. Hal sat in the driver's seat, Jeff at shotgun, and Rod behind the two guys, his head hunched over between them. I use the word "seat" loosely. Hal had installed a hot engine in the thing, a 1961 Chevy V-8, but cared little about seating. He reclined in an old wooden lawn chair with arm rests, the legs removed, and both Jeff and Rod joggled around on upside-down wood-and-metal milk crates, anchoring their crude furniture with the weight of their bodies.

My dad, a highway engineer for the state of California and a fanatic about seat belts, would have pissed his pants.

In the back, I stretched out on a thin gray mattress—the kind I imagined on every military, prison, and asylum bunk in the nation (though prior experience for me was limited to Boy Scout camp). An inch thick, probably stuffed with cotton, it felt wonderfully comfortable to my weary body, even though it rested on the steel-ribbed bed of the Jeep.

My head was fuzzy, and the world seemed distant. It was as though my brain had swollen and pressed against the inside of my skull—no doubt the product of overworked synapses coupled with lack of sleep.

I stared as if in a dream at the paisley design on the material lining the Jeep's ceiling. The night before, when I was ripped, the dimly lit pale-green canvas ceiling and walls of the tent had broken out in a paisley design. Now I understood why my stoner friends loved paisleys.

As I lay with my head over the Jeep's rear axle, I marveled at the near-deafening racket: an awkward symphony of vehicular sounds mixed with music from Hal's makeshift tape deck.

I picked out various sources: a loose license plate clanged, the chains on the tail gate jangled, the under-inflated tires on the asphalt groaned, the wrenches in Hal's metal toolbox jiggled, the unlatched back-window hatch flopped, and the two out-of-sync rusty hinges squeaked—all of that coupled with the overpowering rattling of the tin-can shell of the Jeep and the whooshing of air through the open windows.

And somehow, mysteriously, Ravi's loud, melodious sitar playing at the front of the Jeep drew the confusion of sounds into a marvelous, twisted harmony. Every pothole we hit bounced me along with the sounds of the toolbox and tailgate—like crashing cymbals at the end of a drumroll.

The voices and laughter of my friends occasionally broke through when their banter rose in volume. But the deafening chorus kept lulling me away from their conversation, back into my own thoughts. I treasured the solitude.

I hadn't always been this mellow. As the coddled child of a Jewish mother, I fretted about most things. Jewish mothers often have a high-strung worry gene they desperately try to pass on to their offspring. For many years my mother's attempts succeeded, especially in pressure situations. When I took a test, worry would paralyze me, greatly hampering my ability to answer questions.

But all that changed my senior year in high school—in Mr. Flimberg's physics class.

If you projected a life-sized shadow of a bowling pin onto a wall, you'd see a perfect silhouette of Mr. Flimberg. The poor man spent his youth carrying mortar for bricklayers, and his shoulders never developed properly. The bigger tragedy was that if a real bowling pin had taught that physics class, it would have been more fun. Flimberg managed to take boring to a new, impressive level, making his class as exciting as watching snails race uphill. Of course, my lack of interest in the subject didn't help.

I probably should have felt more sympathy for the unfortunate fel-

low, but at age seventeen, I focused more on my own excessive boredom. Still, as they say, God works in mysterious ways.

A couple of months before graduation, in the spring of 1963, my mind was doing its usual crazy thing during a physics quiz. I was worrying and thinking, worrying and thinking, when out of nowhere, a thought exploded in my head: *Why worry?*

A river of thoughts always rages through our brains. But once in a long while, a special idea gets lodged in an understanding neuron and takes hold. My consciousness shifted. *Why worry? . . . Why worry?*

It's so simple. Worrying has absolutely no effect on the outcome of any situation. If we worry and the undesired result actually happens, the worrying didn't prevent it. And if the undesired result doesn't happen, we wasted all that time making ourselves miserable for nothing.

The only thing that worrying offers is agony and discomfort while we wait for the normal unfolding of our lives. We each have the choice to engage in this preoccupation or abandon it.

How beautiful. We can go from A to B with or without fretting. And "without" is much more pleasant.

I realized this on more than just an intellectual level. Thanks in part to Mr. Flimberg, I had the sort of deep, gut-level epiphany that rewires our belief system so we no longer think or behave in the same way. I soon found that worry had clouded my judgment, and without it, I could see more clearly than ever before.

From then on, I became a mellow, slow-moving, relaxed fellow. Without the interference of fearing the outcome of my actions, the qualities of compassion, honesty, gratitude, and respect could emerge. No longer anxious about what others might think, say, or do, I was free to observe them as they really were. Their masks melted away, and their true feelings became apparent. And I saw that most people were simply looking for love, acceptance, and safety.

As a result, my love for others and for having fun grew, and my thirst for experiencing life intensified. Though some occasions called for legitimate concern, worry was something I rarely bothered with.

In the end, my mom failed in her mission—and that was a good thing.

I smiled. Bears were off that worry list now as well.

Alfred E. Neuman's face popped into my head—the freckled-faced poster boy for *Mad Magazine*, with his unkempt hair and foolish, gap-toothed grin, who always said, “What, me worry?” I shared the same realization with one of the lesser minds of the time. Was it possible that his silly smirk really hid the musings of a sage? I could have felt embarrassed to find I had something in common with goofy old Alfred, but guess what? It didn't worry me at all.