

# Ch i c k e n L i t t l e

By Merri Beth Stephens

One day Chicken Little was walking in the woods when -- KERPLUNK -- an acorn fell on her head

"Oh my goodness!" said Chicken Little. "The sky is falling! I must go and tell the king."

On her way to the king's palace, Chicken Little met Henny Penny. Henny Penny said that she was going into the woods to hunt for worms.

"Oh no, don't go!" said Chicken Little. "I was there and the sky fell on my head! Come with me to tell the king."

So Henny Penny joined Chicken Little and they went along and went along as fast as they could.

Soon they met Cocky Locky, who said, "I'm going to the woods to hunt for seeds."

"Oh no, don't go!" said Henny Penny. "The sky is falling there! Come with us to tell the king."

So Cocky Locky joined Henny Penny and Chicken Little, and they went along and went along as fast as they could.

Soon they met Turkey Lurkey, who was planning to go to the woods to look for berries.

"Oh no, don't go!" said Cocky Locky. "The sky is falling there! Come with us to tell the king " So

Turkey Lurkey joined Cocky Locky, Henny Penny and Chicken Little, and they went along as fast as they could.

Then who should appear on the path but sly old Foxy Woxy.

"Where are you going, my fine feathered friends?" asked Foxy Woxy. He spoke in a polite manner, so as not to frighten them.

"The sky is falling!" cried Chicken Little. "We must tell the king."

"I know a shortcut to the palace," said Foxy Woxy sweetly. "Come and follow me."

But wicked Foxy Woxy did not lead the others to the palace. He led them right up to the entrance of his foxhole. Once they were inside, Foxy Woxy was planning to gobble them up!

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Just as Chicken Little and the others were about to go into the fox's hole, they heard a strange sound and stopped.

It was the king's hunting dogs, growling and howling.

How Foxy Woxy ran, across the meadows and through the forests, with the hounds close behind. He ran until he was far, far away and never dared to come back again.

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After that day, Chicken Little always carried an umbrella with her when she walked in the woods. The umbrella was a present from the king. And if -- KERPLUNK -- an acorn fell, Chicken Little didn't mind a bit. In fact, she didn't notice it at all.

In this version of the old favorite Chicken Little story, everybody comes out okay - - except, that is, the fox. A casual reading of the story reveals the adorable, but not extremely astute, Chicken Little leading her friends into potential harm's way because of her propensity to blow little things out of proportion. She's imagining harm that is not there and subsequently almost falls prey to harm that is actually there. She's worried about things that don't even exist. And these worries cause her to neglect her judgment, act in haste, and do something unwise.

Chicken Little also put her friends in harm's way because of her fears. There was Henny Penny out there hunting for worms, doing the thing that Henny Penny does naturally, being the best hen she could be. Henny Penny was generally a very healthy, self-actualized hen. She understood that hens by their nature hunt worms. She was there, hunting worms, being a hen.

And there was Cocky Locky. All he wanted to do on that sunny day was go into the woods and hunt for seeds. See, Cocky Locky was a rather mindful, fully integrated rooster, spending his moments walking on his path through the woods, keeping his eyes on the ground for seeds. He understood that seeds were what kept him alive, and could there be any more pleasant way of living life than by taking a walk on a sunny day into the woods looking down at the fine earth and enjoying the bounty at his feet?

Turkey Lurkey was also on her way to the woods on this fine summer morning. She knew that the combination of the recent

rains in the forest with the warm summer sunshine had created the most delicious berries of the season. Ah, the rapture of this harvest! Turkey Lurkey understood that the summer season was fleeting and that these berries wouldn't last long. So she was off to the woods to rejoice in ecstasy at the feast ahead of her, finding her bliss while it was available.

But there's Chicken Little, getting everybody stirred up. Chicken Little had to do a little work getting everybody excited, but she eventually convinced the self-actualized Henny Penny, the mindful Cocky Locky and ecstatic Turkey Lurkey to put aside what was truly important to follow her in her frenzied attempt to find somebody who would keep her safe from a perceived harm.

How many times are we led away from living our lives to the fullest? Perhaps there's something just beyond the next hill that will harm us? We end up running around in a frenzied rush looking for salvation from that perceived harm. We start suffering from stress disorders, anxiety, excess worry. We get ulcers and headaches. And worse, our worry and anxiety hasten us toward what it is we were ultimately afraid of - - death. We can literally worry ourselves to death.

Have you ever been jolted awake in the middle of the night by the sense that something is horribly out of control? Like there's a team of people in your head and they're reminding you of a list of problems: all the things you didn't get done that day, people you didn't call back, decisions you're worried about? It's a feeling of uneasiness, apprehension, or dread. These feelings are usually related to negative thoughts of something that may happen in the future. "What will I do if my spouse comes in upset and angry?" "If my child doesn't go to college, will she be okay?" "If we go ahead and get this house, will we be able to make the payments?" "Will we survive the next tornado?"

Worriers live in the future. We spend a disproportionate amount of time speculating on what might occur, and then fearing the worst. Why do we worry?

We worry because we're vulnerable. As human beings, we are susceptible to many things. Disease may strike. The economy may change. We may get stranded by an automobile breakdown or a sudden airline strike. We could get hit by a drunk driver. We're afraid someone may say cutting words or offer harsh criticisms that will wound us deeply. We might get fired. We might lose the house. We might get a divorce.

We are frail, mortal, sensitive human beings. We are vulnerable physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We can get hurt in many ways.

We worry because we become aware of our vulnerability. Most of the time we feel relatively safe. We can make our home secure. We can drive a reliable car and keep it in good repair. We can work hard to provide for our families. We can get regular checkups. We can buy good insurance. We can maintain peaceful relationships. We take care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But then something happens that makes us painfully aware of our vulnerability.

I have a confession to make to you today. I am addicted to worrying. A worry addiction is not like other addictions. Habitual worriers never hear a seductive voice telling them that indulging in one little worry won't hurt, that they've had a hard day at work and are entitled to a relaxing worry, or that a little bit of worrying will help them forget their problems, or go to sleep, or be more comfortable in a social situation. Far from helping us to escape, worrying seems to hurl us into the midst of the anxiety which people use other addictions to avoid. It's difficult to imagine what possible - - or desirable - - purpose it might serve.

Recently I realized that I hadn't worried for a while. This worried me. I decided to find out why. First, I listened to what I said to myself when I worried, and what kinds of feelings accompanied this thought process. To take an example, I worried about my cat, the Kernel, whenever he seemed to be less than his healthy, annoying self. My thoughts and feelings went something like this:

He doesn't look good, and his nose is dry. Should I take him to the vet? He hates going to the vet, and he could pick up some disease there - - but what if it's something really serious. I'll never forgive myself if I ignore this and it turns out to be something terrible. But what if the vet misdiagnoses it? What if she says it's something terrible, and it isn't? What if she says it isn't something terrible, and it is? I wish I knew what to do; I'll never forgive myself if...

Why was I worrying? I didn't want Kernel to be vulnerable to the inevitable. I don't want something to happen to him.

I do this same thing with everyone in my life. And that makes me feel vulnerable. I can't keep any of you from harm. And I can't keep myself from harm. It's inevitable. I will die. I will not last forever. I am vulnerable. But I don't want to die. And it seems that I'm not the only one out there with this fear of death.

At this very moment there are people out there cloning tissue and organs, manipulating genes, regulating hormones, and searching frantically for ways to unlock the mysteries of aging. We want to defeat the inevitable.

The market for anti-aging therapies, products and publications is booming, as an unknown number of people take life extension into their own hands. Sales of vitamins, herbal, hormonal and other supplemental products purported to increase vitality and/or even to retard aging are on the rise, though little long-term clinical research about their usefulness and side effects has been done.

A tiny number who wish to avoid death's finality are betting on more drastic means, such as the oft-ridiculed field of cryonics. Upon death, the body (or for those with less economic wherewithal, just the head) is rushed by a "recovery" team to a facility where it is frozen at artificially low temperatures (-320F) and stored until science finds a way to bring the body or brain back to life.

There are people out there taking human growth hormone, melatonin and testosterone in an attempt to regain their youthful vigor and reverse the aging process. There are researchers at the University of Colorado's Institute for Behavioral Genetics who have discovered several genes which significantly increased lifespan in a particular type of worm. They are now studying mice.

So we rush. We rush to health food stores. We rush to buy human growth hormone and testosterone. We rush to do whatever is necessary to increase the chances that we'll live forever. Then when we finally die at age 120, somebody else rushes our body to a cryogenic lab, so we can be frozen in anticipation of some future scientific advance that will bring us back to life. Why? So we can then continue working toward immortality! There's no time to wait! Every minute that passes is moving us toward our nemesis.

Well, that's one way to look at it. We can spend our entire lives staving off the inevitable, or we can spend our lives being fully present. Do I really want to live to be 120 years old if my entire life is full of worry and anxiety? Not that I'm one who's generally want to quote scripture, but as the Apostle Paul said, "What profiteth a man if he gains the world and lose his soul?"

I have been fortunate enough in my life to have met some extraordinary people. People who have helped me see life as a gift, and also to realize that, like the child who disappointedly receives clothes for her birthday, it is not always what we expect.

But like most gifts, sometimes waiting for it is the best part. I have waited a long time for the gift of a content soul. And learning to wait for life without worrying about what's coming up is where I will find it. But why is finding this peace of mind so difficult to do? I tend to think it's because we must trust and love people in order to get there. We understand that others have a certain amount of control over circumstances that impact us, and that's pretty frightening. We would like to be totally self sufficient. But that's not possible. Other people in our lives have power. They have the power to hold us, comfort us, love us, lift us up, and also, yes, on occasion to hurt us and harm us.

Perhaps our natural inclination is to believe that we can't trust anyone, because people betray each other. The world is a dangerous place. Well, it's true that sometimes people do betray each other. And the world can be dangerous. But we can't change that. We can only change ourselves, slow down and be right here, right now. We can look around at the people in the chairs beside us and begin the slow process of trusting. Oh, betrayal will take place, but not every time. When we reach out to trust someone and that someone does not betray us, the cloud of anxiety starts to lift and the next thing you know, we're more content and peaceful.

Another way that people work their way through anxiety is to choose to move into action. Looking around, checking the calendar, evaluating our progress, we may feel that the more we do the closer we bring ourselves to our goal. There are times when this is true and we need to understand what is required to be done and then take resolute action. But we must ask ourselves whether action always requires movement. That is, could it be true that there are times when we must sense the flow of our lives and allow it to decide the timing of events, the pace at which our vision unfolds? And when we become still in this way, isn't this a form of action? A deliberate choosing? This is the delicate balance between waiting and working.

I can make positive changes in the world. But not by worrying. I can spend my time with you here this morning worrying about whether we're going to afford our new meeting house, worrying about whether we're going to keep growing, worrying about whether going to Two Sunday Services will make some people feel disenfranchised, worrying about whether our one dishwasher is going to be able to handle the load, worrying about whether we will find enough volunteers to teach R.E., worrying about whether there will be enough coffee, whether we will ever find a youth director, worrying whether the goat lady will ever sell us her property, ad nauseum. Or I could do as the Taoists advise, and just be here with you today.

I can choose to just be in harmony with you. I can enjoy these moments of togetherness, realizing that they may be fleeting. Lao Tsu talks about this way of looking at life as being "in the Way". In other words, this is the path we're on. Let's be on this path in the best way we can. There is a time for action, but that action should flow from a place of peace. Not a place of anxiety.

I love music. When it all clicks, it's bliss. It really is. You're not worrying about whether your fingers are working right - - you're not in control at all. It's as if you don't have anything to do with the music anymore. And that's when it's the best, because you're not thinking about it too much. That's the goal, really - - to be able to get that to happen consistently, to connect, to not have anything to do with it, every time. There's no ego in there, there's nothing in there but the music.

When the deepest part of you becomes engaged in what you're doing, when your activities and actions become gratifying and purposeful, when what you do serves both yourself and others, when you do not tire within but seek the sweet satisfaction of your

life and your work, you are doing what you were meant to be doing. You are not burdened with anxiety, fear and worry.

I've missed much of the pleasure along my journey, simply because too often I wasn't "there". So often my body is in one place and my mind has already rushed down the road to the future, fretting about something I "should" be doing. I continually race through the day, in my car, in my career and in my conversations. In my haste to "get there", I miss out on a world of experiences the journey itself has to offer. I do not want to get to the end of my journey only to discover I've missed it. I don't want to find out you all have been back here having fun in the new meeting house while I've been driving up and down GA 400 worrying about how we're going to pay for it.

And nobody can save me from myself, but me. I must do my own soul work, as you must do yours. We all already have everything we need within us to live a full and meaningful life. No one is promised complete immunity from the discords of life while on earth. Problems will inevitably arise. We can choose to deal with them as they arise, or worry and fret about them before they get here, and then be completely exhausted when the problems arise.

Chicken Little felt that the king, in all his wisdom, could save her from the falling sky. We picture the king as a wise and benevolent man who patted Chicken Little's hand, and gave her an umbrella so that she wouldn't come running back to him the next time an acorn fell on her head. Wouldn't it be nice if life was that simple, if there was somebody out there who could make all our problems go away?

Well, we're Unitarian Universalists and we don't have a wise king. We only have ourselves to rely on to get through building projects and two Sunday services, and shortages of volunteers. And harm will come our way. Foxy Loxy will not stay out of the forest

forever. He will be back. And big acorns will fall on our heads (for those of you who have been walking through the yard of our house here in the fall, you know how true this statement is). Will we be the panicky Chicken Little? Or the self-actualized Henny Penny, the mindful Cockey Locky and the ecstatic Turkey Lurkey? Not that they were perfect, by any means. As a matter of fact, they were moments away from being devoured by Foxy Loxy. My metaphor is clearly falling apart. Let me see if I can pull it together here. Okay, maybe we'll all be saved by big dogs.

In the meantime, be mindful. Be present. Act from a place of peace.

Thank you.