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Chicken Little

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We all know the story of Chicken Little, right? “The sky is falling! The sky is falling?” Well, do you remember how that little folk tale and bedtime story ended? I didn’t. So I looked it up. Actually there are two different endings… one much more optimistic than the other. And this little blog entry is about optimism, or… the lack thereof.

Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start:

> Chicken Little likes to walk in the woods. She likes to look at the trees. She likes to smell the flowers. She likes to listen to the birds singing.

Wow, Ms Little sounds like a lovely, innocent, and cock-eyed optimist, no? At least to me she does. But then…

> One day, while Chicken Little went walking, an acorn fell from a very tall tree, and it hit the top of her little head.
> -Oh my, oh, my, the sky is falling! I must run and tell the king!

And she begins to run.

Ah…. the Fall from Grace. God’s little wake up call. A head-hitting, gob-smack of reality.

> She runs and she runs… until… by and by, she runs into Henny Penny.
> -Where are you going? asks the hen.

> – Oh, Henny Penny, the sky is falling, the sky is falling, and I am going to tell the king.
> -How do you know? asks Henny Penny.
> -It hit me right on the head, so I know it must be so, says Chicken Little.

> – Let me go with you to see the king! – says Henny Penny. (In some versions, the "king" is called the "lion:)
> – Run, run! says Henny Penny

Two believers are better than one, right?
So the two run and run until they meet Ducky Daddles. Then Cocky Locky. Then Goosey Poosey. Then Turkey Lurkey.

> – The sky is falling, the sky is falling! They all shout to one other. -We are going to find the king to tell him about it.

So they all run on and on until they meet Foxey Loxey.

> – Where are you going? – asks Foxey Loxey.

> – The sky is falling, the sky is falling, and we are going to tell the king about it, says Chicken Little.
> – Do you know where he lives? – asks the sly fox.
> – I don't, says Chicken Little.
> – I don't, says Henny Penny.
> – I don't, says Ducky Daddles…. (etc etc.)
> – Well *I* do, says Foxey Loxey. – Come with me and I can show you the way.

He walks them on and on, until he comes to his den.

> – Come right in, says Foxey Loxey.
> They all go in, but… they never, never…. come out again.

That's how one version of the story ends.
The other goes like this, in response to the fox's invitation:

> -Tricky Foxy Woxy, the king's not in there! They shout in unison.
> And they run away as fast as they can… all the way to the king's palace.
> -King! King! The sky is falling! The sky is falling! A piece of it fell on Chicken Little's head.

> "The wise king looks at them all, points to the sky and laughs.
> -The sky is *not* falling. An acorn just fell on your head, Chicken Little.
> "And he plucks the acorn from Chicken Little's little head.And so Turkey Lurkey, Goosey Poosey, Cocky Locky, Ducky Daddles, and Chicken Little all go back home.
> -Whew! The sky is NOT falling, they all say in unison, breathing a deep sigh of relief.
> Thank goodness.

And that's how the second version ends.
Which version do you prefer? And what's the moral of the two stories?

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Well…. I remember my father… back in the post WW2 1950s. My father, son of immigrant European Jews, who grew up during the Depression, whose job in the War as a staff sergeant was to inspect fighter planes, C-52s I think, before they flew off into battle. He had to make sure every little mechanical detail was okay. Safe. Engine, pistons, cockpit controls, things that I have entirely no idea about. But he was good at it. So good, in fact, that he never sent off a defective plane. So good… that his fellow soldiers came to call his own plane, my father's… the "Worry Wort". You see, my father was… Chicken Little. He *always* thought the sky was going to fall.

And so, that's what he taught me, his son. How to worry. About everything. About getting good grades in school. Or *not* getting them. Anything less than 100% was a disaster. I remember taking tests in high school, knowing that I got a question wrong, I would fret and worry and beat myself up, sure that I would fail, until I got the test back a few days later, usually with 90% plus. My friends got sick of listening to me. I was the boy who cried wolf. I worried about getting into the best college, or *not* getting in, even though my parents ended up sending me to the State University to save money. I worried about *not* having enough money. About *not* having a girlfriend. About *not* having sex. I worried about any way, and every way, things could go wrong. Very wrong. I worried about… the sky falling.
The other thing my father taught me was how to find "what was wrong" with every little thing. For along with being a soft, loving, generous, and caring man, my father was a natural and expert critic. He could, and would, find flaws in everything. On the C-52s. In the beautiful cherry wood salad bowls he turned on his lathe downstairs in his basement woodshop. In things. And… in me. My hair, my skin, my teeth, my legs, my thoughts, my ideas. And so I learned, he taught me, that nothing was ever good enough. That I was never good enough. That something was always *wrong*.
Perhaps all children learn this from their parents. I don't know. How do we all, at least most of the people I know, go from being wide-eyed and innocent Chicken Littles into becoming the insecure and self doubting human beings most of us grow into? Is it our parents? Our culture of constant striving, dreaming, and perfection? I know that in my wife's third world Indonesian culture of hard work, poverty, and survival, her family had no time, no language, for self analysis, self criticism, or psychology; yet they too, surprisingly, ended up as doubtful and insecure as the rest of us. So I wonder how and why it happens. Maybe it's just life itself, where the sky is *always* falling… or at least, is always *going to* fall: health, wealth, weather, war; nothing is ever secure, things will always go wrong.

But the problem with the fear, the worry, of anticipating something always about to go wrong, is that a) like Chicken Little's first story ending, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. There are

always Foxy Loxies out there in the big bad world, ready and willing to lead you into their dens from where you will never again return. Or b) worrying all the time becomes a habit, an uncomfortable but familiar way of life. It makes things worse. Like scratching an itch. For example, we all know that anyone can get poison ivy when walking in the woods, but children don't know not to scratch, which feels good at first, but ultimately makes the poison ivy spread, the itch get worse, until soon the eyes and the whole body are full of poison ivy. The same with fear and worry. The smallest criticism, set back, or problematic life circumstance can set off the spiraling, out of control cycle of poisonous self recrimination and pessimism.

I have this friend, let's call him Rick Bombach, another high-strung, worrying Jew. Short, smart, funny, and a bespectacled hypochondriac like Woody Allen, Rick is sure the sky is always going to fall. He's always ready. We have this ongoing joke between us that whenever we go anywhere together, he always takes his own car… so he doesn't have to wait for me and he can leave whenever he wants. He anticipates boredom, doom, disaster… and he usually finds it. Actually, I think it's a pretty good idea to take your own car, and have followed the practice myself. But… Rick also parks his car trunk-first into a driveway or parking spot, with the hood and driver's wheel always facing *out.* Even in his own driveway at home. He is always prepared for the getaway. For things to go wrong. For the sky to fall. He leads a cautious, well-planned, conservative life. He tries to prevent having bad experiences. Does it work? Ask Rick…

He's learned and trained himself… and I've done the same…. never to open his arms to life. Never to accept… or expect… the good. To acknowledge the good. Because if we do that, our open arms are just an invitation to get smashed by life. To be disappointed. To let in the bad. Calamity. Misfortune. Sickness. Heartache. Pain. Foxy Loxey leading us to his den. It's better, safer, to expect the worst. To be ready. To point the car out. To keep our fists clenched. To never open our arms to life.

Now of course, I know this is a bad habit. A self-fulfilling, nihilistic way to go through life. Expect the worst? Never be joyous or satisfied. Because life might pull the carpet out from underneath you? Might sock you in the jaw? Any time? Anywhere?

But c'mon! Anyone can see that it's a no win philosophy. Sure, it might be good for producing a movie, anticipating things going wrong – so they won't. Maybe that's why Jews make such good producers? But let's not just blame it on the Jews. Because how many of us, of all shapes and sizes, criticize ourselves, point our cars out, expect the worst to happen?

Of course, that's what Tony Robbins, Werner Ehrhardt, L. Ron Hubbard, all variety of life coaches, and sports psychologists are for. *Visualizing*. Stating the positive. Having goals and realizing them. But how many smart, educated people just can't do it? Me, personally? I can't tell you how many times I've tried affirming, meditating, surrendering, praying, and visualizing, seen nothing, and struck out.

Because maybe, here's the thing. At least in my Tribe. When your race has been scapegoated, persecuted, and exterminated — throughout history — you tend to develop the overwhelming, lifelong habit of looking over your shoulder, or up at the sky — and expect it to happen again. You don't open your arms to life and leave yourself open to disaster. Instead, you expect the sky to fall. You become Chicken Little.

Is it genetic? Learned? Historical? Hard to say. But certainly Hitler's Holocaust was not the first genocide of the Jews. Nor is my Tribe the only one to have suffered a history of genocide.

But it has happened throughout history. Jews persecuted and annihilated by the majority civilization. From Biblical times, through Greek, Roman, Christian, European, and modern times. Read Leon Uris' The Source. Of course, Israel is based on the premise "Never Again," but I'm not talking politics or even history. I'm talking about good old Jewish pessimism. First hand. Up close

and personal.

I'm talking about having persecution and annihilation nightmares for as long as I can remember, just as my father told me he had, and now my sister tells me she has. I'm talking about fearing and obsessing about running out of money, outliving my retirement funds, ending up penniless in a nursing home, having my wife leave me, losing my memory, my health, getting evicted, ending up homeless, dropping my iPhone in the green plastic watering can (it already happened). The list goes on… and on.

The question is … what good does this constant worry do me? Does it protect me from having these things happen? I doubt it. Will it provoke and put into motion any of these things happening in the future? I don't know. I'll keep you informed. But why shouldn't it? It's my form of visualizing. Seeing and expecting the worst, so that if and when it happens… I'm prepared. I've thought about it. Anticipated it. I'm ready for it.

Bullshit, Trules!

Tony and Werner know it's bullshit. Buddhists know it. My wife knows it. Even I know it's… bullshit!

Then… why can't I stop? Goodness knows, I've tried. I've taken enough workshops, said enough affirmations, studied enough spiritual and religious paths. Only to end up being first an agnostic, then a confirmed and defensive atheist. Still the nightmares persist. The criticism, self and otherwise, persists. Still I look over my shoulder and up at the sky, expecting it to fall.

"Just live in the moment." "Appreciate what you have." "Accept the things you can not change, have the courage to change the things you can." I believe in these ideas. I repeat and practice them every day of my life. "One day at a time." Courage, risk, "jump on the train of opportunity".

And so it goes…. ….and so it goes.

Changing life-long patterns is hard.

Which ending of the story do you prefer, Chicken Little?

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