

So You Want

PEACE

OF

MIND!

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so you want . . .

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By Hugh P. O'Neill, S.J.

A QUEEN'S WORK  
PAMPHLET

Reacidified

# So You Want PEACE OF MIND!

By HUGH P. O'NEILL, S. J.

**T**HE BOOK STALLS are jammed tight nowadays with colorfully jacketed volumes on that great common goal, "Peace of Mind." If a conscientious reader were to take a few years and plod through all of them, he would probably emerge from the experience with weak eyes, a wan smile, and a burning anxiety about which of the books is best suited to quench a burning anxiety.

Nevertheless I'll agree that the subject is worthwhile. As a matter of fact, I once became so enthused about it that I wrote a long dissertation on "Peace of Mind," complete with definitions, disquisitions, illustrations, ramifications, and apt quotations. It was really a nice job, but whenever I read it over, I got such a peaceful feeling that I dropped off to sleep.

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THE QUEEN'S WORK

So I tore it up, threw it away, and forthwith decided that a better subject would be "Worry." There is one sure thing about worry: it keeps people awake.

## **Satan and Worry**

In turning the topic upside down, I do not mean to imply that worry is the only obstacle or the greatest obstacle to peace of mind. I merely mean that Satan has devised no means more effective than worry for souring the lives of good people everywhere.

In general the greatest enemy to peace of mind is a bad conscience, but there is a remedy for bad consciences.

King David, St. Peter, St. Mary Magdalen, and St. Augustine—all had at one time very bad consciences, but they found peace of mind in sincere contrition and the assurance of divine pardon. They did not moon and fret over the fact that they had spoiled their record. They did not think about their record. They thought only of restoring to God the glory of which their sins had deprived Him. They did not indulge in remorse. Remorse is depressing. They had recourse to true contrition. True contrition is stimulating, inspiring, dynamic.

## The Will of God

An incurable disease or financial disaster gives some people a good chance to be sorry for themselves; but I know a number of chronic invalids and permanent insolvents who radiate nothing but sunshine and cheerfulness. They are able to do this because their hearts are in tune with God's heart and they have resigned themselves to His beneficent will.

Every healthy minded human being has a natural capacity and tendency to accept the inevitable, and this natural disposition, aided by divine grace, can face anything with equanimity. Some painful situations in life can be changed by our own efforts. God expects us to find and apply the remedy.

Other situations cannot be changed, such as the loss of a limb or the death of a dear friend. God expects us to accept these situations as an expression of His divine will. It does not matter how such situations arise. They may be due to accidents or to the malice of others, or they may be direct results of sinful actions on our own part. Just as soon as the situation becomes unchangeable, it becomes the will of God in our regard.

When we turn to God in our troubles, He does not say: "It was your own fault. Take your medicine." He always says: "Come to me and I will refresh you."

### **What Is It?**

Now let us turn to the chief bugbear of good people: worry. What is worry? Worry is a chronic state of apprehensiveness, a mixture of fear for the future, regret for the past, uneasiness in the present—all heavily spiced with feelings of guilt. It is a sort of psychological cold in the head, just about as pleasant, as stubborn, as universal, and as non-fatal as chronic sinusitis. The scientific name for this pestiferous malady is "anxiety neurosis." We shall call it neurosis for short.

Rudolph Allers says that we are all potential neurotics. A brother psychiatrist says that Allers is crazy. "It is not true," says he, "that we are all potential neurotics. Cross out 'potential'."

Be that as it may, it is admitted by all authorities that at least one-third of the population of the United States suffers from neurosis to an extent that definitely interferes with work, marriage, health, and the pursuit of happiness. The bright spot

in the picture, if it can be called bright, is that neurotics often live to a ripe old age, and seldom go crazy.

## Symptoms

Well now, my dear brother and sister neurotics, let us discuss our symptoms. We shall keep it all in the family. Not a word outside of this pamphlet!

A typical neurotic may be expected to possess a personalized assortment of some of the following characteristics: He may have a constantly recurring feeling of inadequacy and frustration, sometimes amounting to actual depression. He may suffer from a general inability to get along with people, or to feel at home with them. He may even be haunted with the feeling that other people are *not* looking at him. He usually has one or two pet phobias, that is, exaggerated fears of such things as high places, dark rooms, or front seats; thunderstorms, microbes, spiders, or cats. He has groundless fears of disease, presentiments of calamity, and anticipations of failure. He may have a whole host of bodily ailments for which his doctor can find no physical cause at five dollars a visit. He has a chronic sense of guilt, or acute attacks of scrupulosity. He is often a perfectionist, never satisfied with any-

thing that he does. He writes dissertations, reads them over and throws them away. (Have I left anybody out?)

## **Insecurity**

A careful inspection of these and all other neurotic symptoms will reveal the fact that they all spring from one common root: a sense of insecurity. The neurotic is afraid of something. He is afraid that he has lost, or will lose, or does not have enough of, a certain quality without which life is not worth living.

What is it that we all must have to make life worth living?

It is the same thing for all of us, saint or sinner, rich or poor, old or young. That one thing is a consciousness of personal value.

What does that mean? A thing is said to have value if it deserves to be wanted. A thing that no one could ever want has no value; a thing that is currently wanted has actual value; a thing that may be wanted in the future has potential value. You and I simply must have a feeling that we deserve to be wanted and that there are at least a few people who don't mind having us around.



Now why do I say "need to be wanted" instead of "need to be loved"? Isn't love, after all, the whole purpose of our existence? Did not God make us all to love and be loved?

That is quite true, and love is the only thing that can satisfy us. Yet there are people in the world who do not know the meaning of love. As children they may never have had any experience of true love, but in any event, their hearts have been so calloused by selfishness that they have no capacity for either giving or receiving true love. Still these people do have a deep craving to be wanted, and they try to satisfy this craving by creating situations in which other people will not be able to get along without them.

One way of doing this is to seize positions of power and authority—in other words, become important. A thing is important only if you cannot get along without it. We cannot imagine that Malenkov cares whether anyone loves him. He does not know what true love means, but he has done a pretty good job of seeing to it that hundreds of millions of people are not going to get along without him. If these people are interested in living, they had better be interested in Georgi. At the other end of the scale

we find possessive parents who do all that they can to keep their children from growing up and becoming independent of them.

### **A Basic Fear**

There is a better way of illustrating this need to be wanted. A certain writer makes the statement that the basic fear in all human hearts is the fear of being engulfed in the ocean of humanity, that is to say, of being lost in the crowd, of being overlooked, forgotten. Most of us are not interested in cutting a figure in the ocean of humanity, but it would kill us to find ourselves down in the mud at the bottom of our own little frogpond.

This approach may be developed as follows: If nobody knows about me, nobody will care about me; and if nobody cares about me, I may as well not exist. I become a social nonentity.

Now we know that the strongest instinct in human nature is the instinct of self-preservation. This instinct goes into action just as soon as we are faced with a threat to life or limb. At the thought of annihilation it becomes absolutely frantic. We fear death chiefly because it symbolizes, and seems to imply, annihilation; and confronted with a choice be-

tween dying of pneumonia and being vaporized by an atom bomb, we would probably choose the former. The thought of it would not give us so much of that all-gone feeling; it would leave something around which to build a funeral.

### **Social Survival**

Now this same instinct of self-preservation is much more interested in our social than in our physical survival. Social annihilation is a much greater calamity than death, and suicide itself is a natural response to the conviction that the society of one's fellow men has nothing more to offer. It is a variation of the old wheeze: "You can't fire me. I quit."

It is quite probable that morbid fear concerning one's health is merely a displacement of fear concerning social significance. A person whose finger is always on his pulse is really not counting his heartbeats; he is merely wondering if anybody loves him.

We can never overestimate what social significance means to us. Anyone who says that he does not care what anybody thinks about him, who means what he says, and who acts on that attitude, is contradicting the basic law of human nature and is mentally very sick. We sometimes read

in the papers of hermits who live in the woods or who shut themselves up in their city homes. They are all essentially psychotic, which is a scientific way of saying "absolutely nuts."

### **Love for Fellow Men**

Now how can I save myself from being lost in the crowd? Well, if I have a sincere love for my fellow men, I shall not even think of the possibility of being lost in the crowd. I shall be so united to them by the bonds of love that it will be impossible for me to feel that I am forgotten.

In this connection I must remember that it is my love for my fellow men more than their love for me that gives me the feeling of security, the feeling of belonging. There must of course be some reciprocity, but it does not have to be on a fifty-fifty basis. No child ever loves a mother as much as the mother loves the child, and a mother's love for her child is more important for her mental health than is her feeling that she is loved by her child. But suppose that I do not love my fellow men. I must then find some way to keep myself from being lost in the crowd. The only way that I can do this is to make myself prominent, make

myself distinctive, make myself first, highest, most powerful, most wealthy, anything at all that will make people notice me.

We sometimes wonder why so many men drive themselves to death in their efforts to make a fortune, to attain political power, or win some coveted honor. We call it avarice or ambition, but avarice and ambition do not tell the whole story. The instinct of self-preservation has entered the picture. Such men have maneuvered themselves into a state of mind in which the attainment of a certain goal becomes an absolute necessity if they are to escape social annihilation. In their minds, to be outdone by anybody is to be sunk; to come in second is to be lost in the crowd of those who also ran.

When a man wants money merely for the things that money can buy, he may easily reach a stage where he will be willing to retire and enjoy life. But if money becomes symbolic of social position, he can never have enough of it.

Here is a man for instance who says to himself: "If I could only make a million dollars, I would really be somebody. Wouldn't people look up at me?"

Well, he makes his million dollars, and as he stands on his little mountain top

and looks around, he suddenly finds that he is surrounded by several hundred other little mountains, each with a tycoon on top. What a disappointment!

“What’s the use?” he says. “Here I am, just another millionaire! Lost in the crowd!”

Then he pulls himself together, and sets his goal at twenty million.

### **Envy of Power**

There is still another reason why the quest for power and wealth and honor defeats its own purpose. To become powerful means to make a lot of enemies, because you have made a lot of people afraid of you. To become wealthy means to create envy in the hearts of less successful seekers of wealth; to win a championship means that you have defeated and humiliated the rest of the field.

Power, wealth, and honor do not bring men together. They divide, they separate, they make men bitter rivals. The only way that a successful man can retain his position is to gain more power, freeze out all competitors, liquidate all enemies.

Now what has all this to do with us poor neurotics? Simply this: I and you and the rest of us have been bitten by

the same bug. We have been breathing the atmosphere of rugged individualism. We do not have sufficient confidence in the power of love to save us from social asphyxiation.

We too would like to be first in some line or other. We may not be conscious of it, but the ambition is there along with the jealousy, the resentment, the aggressiveness, the hostility that are inseparable from ambition.

### **The Glamorous "Me"**

Down in the heart, that is, in the subconscious mind of every neurotic, there is a picture of a very glamorous person. That picture represents the degree of success which the neurotic feels that he must attain if life is to have any meaning. It is not merely the type of person that he would like to be; it is the kind of person that he must become if he is to escape annihilation. This is the central factor in all neurosis.

Now the neurotic may take three different attitudes toward this image of himself.

He may be under the delusion that he has already become his idealized image, and he will unwittingly adopt the postures, the gestures, the dress, and the tone of

voice that are in keeping with that image. He will become socially intolerable, and the reaction of his friends, or rather of his associates, will be: "Well, who in the devil does he think he is?" Meantime the poor fellow wonders what is the matter. He does not mean any harm; he is not trying to be a big shot; he is just trying to survive.

### **The Perfectionist**

More often the neurotic will feel that the idealized image is almost within reach, and that he will attain it if he will only try hard enough. He reminds us of a person standing on tiptoe trying to get his fingers on a tantalizing curtain cord. Such a person is called a perfectionist; he gives himself no rest day or night. In the eyes of his friends he may be a very successful man, but he does not measure success by their plebeian standards. As long as he has not reached his idealized goal, he is a failure.

We often meet people who really should be very happy and satisfied with their lot in life, but instead of that, we find them restless, moody, often depressed and ready to give up the fight. Sometimes they do give up, and that means that they have



taken the third attitude, the feeling that their idealized image has forever escaped them. What is called a nervous breakdown is often nothing more than the result of a sudden realization that the idealized image has vanished into thin air. Such a breakdown can be a serious thing, but it need not be. If we can catch the poor fellow before he jumps from the Empire State Building, we may be able to show him how to construct a more sensible image, one that he can actually attain. Karen Horney claims that a neurotic may achieve a very fine adjustment to reality through a series of nervous breakdowns, but that, of course, is the hard way.

### **Twofold Difference**

The difference between an idealized image and a true ideal consists in two things. First, a true ideal is something that you would like to achieve if you could; an idealized image is subconscious, and therefore, hazy, nebulous, and fantastic. The pursuit of an ideal can make us feel expansive, dynamic, and friendly; the pursuit of an idealized image makes us cold, secretive, suspicious, and aggressive.

## **Subconscious vs. Respectability**

We have made use of the term "subconscious mind." Perhaps we should have a definition. The subconscious mind is really nothing more than a set of feelings that are so contrary to our sense of respectability that we are not willing to admit that we have them, at least not to the extent that we have them.

Such feelings are greediness, cowardice, sensuality, jealousy, hatred—in fact, all the capital sins. They represent the savage in us. For instance, we pay a sincere compliment to a friend who has been elected to office. We really mean what we say, but the subconscious mind is burned up with jealousy. We are grateful for some good advice, but the subconscious mind wishes that so-and-so had minded his own business. We pray most devoutly for our boss's speedy recovery from illness, but our subconscious mind can see certain advantages in a permanent relapse. I could go on and give more examples, but I am not willing to incriminate myself any further.

It is very hard for us to admit the presence of such unlovable traits in ourselves, but we may as well face them because they are there. The saints recognized their presence, and that is why they

could say such terrible things about themselves. We close our eyes to them and that is why we are neurotic.

### **Subversion of the Mind**

The fact that we have thousands of Communists in this country does not make the United States a Communist country. They cause a lot of local trouble, they hate everything that we stand for, they would like to overthrow our government. Yet we are not too much afraid of them; we know that they could never win a national election or put through any Communistic legislation. We also know that we can control them more effectively if we keep them out in the open and do not drive them underground.

It is the same with the subversive elements in our subconscious minds. These tendencies cause us to be oversensitive to slights or supposed insults, to exaggerate dangers and difficulties, to be impulsive, to say mean things, and to wish terrible things. On the other hand they do not outvote our love or dominate our actions in things that really matter. Why then should we be so afraid of admitting their presence, why should we drive them underground by denying their existence? If we look them in the face, they will make us

feel humble, but they will not make us feel guilty.

All neurotics feel guilty because they do not know where the stench is coming from.

Moreover the more we repress our unlovable instincts, the more inclined we are to attribute those very tendencies to others, and that precisely is where the great harm is done. We become too prone to distrust the love of others. We are constantly asking them to prove that they love us. A hasty word, a bit of negligence or of selfishness on their part is often quite enough to make us feel, for the moment at least, that they do not love us at all. Then our instinct of self-preservation goes into a dither and we explode. That is why we are so unaccountably interested in maintaining our importance, our power, our glamor, and all the other things that we think will keep us from becoming nobodies even in our own families.

## **Childhood**

The amount of trustfulness that we feel toward others is profoundly influenced by the experiences of our childhood. To be a first-class neurotic you have to start quite young, usually before the age of six. You must have had parents who

were themselves maladjusted. Mothers get most of the blame, but then the majority of books on the subject are written by men.

These parents were either too indulgent and spoiled you, or they were too possessive and refused to let you grow up, or they were too exacting and gave you the feeling that you could never do anything right, and that you were destined to be at least a mild disgrace to the family. Perhaps they were always quarreling and made you apprehensive that your home might break up at any time. Perhaps they constantly worried over matters of health, or finances, or social position, or the follies of the national administration then in power.

As the result of living in this troubled atmosphere you developed feelings of inadequacy, of insecurity, of secret antagonism toward your parents, a secret sense of guilt for having that antagonism, a secret desire to punish yourself for being such a naughty boy or girl, and so on *ad infinitum*.

This situation was complicated by another factor. Most parents realize that young children do not naturally love their brothers and sisters. They have to be taught this love. Children are natural rivals for parental attention and care;

often they are bitter rivals. The least favor shown to one and withheld from another is the occasion of jealousy, and jealousy always includes hate.

Well-adjusted and religious-minded parents are usually very successful in coping with this situation. Other parents are not so successful. They are apt to show favoritism, take sides, permit teasing and other forms of cruelty, and reinforce it all by the bad example of their own hot tempers. The result will be that rivalry, mistrust, suspicion, aggression, and revenge will warp the personalities of their children, and set the stage for future trouble.

We must bear in mind that a hostile attitude toward parents and brothers and sisters in childhood carries over into adult life and poisons marriage and all other dealings with our fellow men. Worst of all, it cannot fail to have an unfortunate effect on our relations with God Himself.

### **God and Neighbor**

Our divine Lord once said: "If you do not love your neighbor whom you see, how can you love God whom you do not see?"

Similarly if we do not trust our neighbor whom we see, how can we trust God

whom we do not see? Many a case of scrupulosity would clear up if the scrupulous person could only realize that he is treating God with the same lack of trustfulness that he manifests toward his fellow men, or used to manifest toward his parents in childhood.

When we were little children, our parents occupied the place of God in our regard. They had all the attributes of deity. They were ever so much stronger than we were, they had authority over us, we depended upon them for protection. They knew more than we did. They knew everything. They could tell when we had been in mischief. In fact they usually caught us in the act. They gave us our standard of morality: what they smiled at was morally good, what they frowned at was naughty.

Eventually they told us that there was someone else whose smile and frown were more important than theirs. They told us about "Our Father who art in heaven." Now if our parents were unduly harsh with us, or if they were inconsistent and unpredictable, it is easy to see that we probably got off to a bad start in our attitude toward our heavenly Father. This twisted attitude may still be lurking in the depths of our subconscious minds.

## A Remedy

Now let us sum up and propose a remedy. Worry, as we have seen, is a chronic sense of insecurity in regard to personal value. We are afraid of social annihilation. We have not learned to trust people. We are afraid that they do not love us enough, that they do not care for us. The reason for this mistrust is at bottom a carryover from childhood.

Without knowing what we are up to, we demand too much love, too many assurances of love, and we are more than a bit stingy with our own love. We try to make up for this supposed lack of love by aiming at importance, prominence, success. This program defeats its own purpose. It inserts further wedges between us and our fellow men, and between us and God. It makes other men not friends, but rivals, competitors, enemies. In our blindness we try to remedy this situation by grasping at more importance, more prominence, more success. We become involved in a vicious circle; and the older we get, the more desperate our plight becomes.

The remedy is obvious—not easy, but obvious and within reach of all.



It consists in cultivating better relations with God and our fellow men. Better relations mean more love, more sincere love, more trustfulness.

The best way to cultivate trustfulness is to act as if you already have it. It is a basic truth of psychology that if you want to have a certain feeling, the best way to get it is to act as if you already have it. The only way to get at the subconscious mind is through action. If you want to feel brave, act brave; if you want to feel cheerful, smile; if you want to be a loving friend, act the part of a loving friend, both to God and to man.

This is not hypocrisy. You are not trying to get something out of your friends; you are trying to get something into yourself. You are trying to re-educate yourself, to become emotionally mature.

Realize that your adult personality has been slanted by your childhood experiences. You cannot get rid of the slant entirely, but you can reduce it amazingly. The more you reduce it, the more peace of mind you will enjoy.

Of course it would not be realistic to expect anything like perfect peace of mind in this life. Even St. Paul desired to be dissolved and to be with Christ.

In the economic order a 40 percent reduction in prices and taxes would undoubtedly balance your budget. In the psychological order a 40 percent reduction in worry would make life quite tolerable for all of us. I cannot promise you the first 40 percent, but the second is a definite possibility, and you do not have to wait until election time to do something about it.

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