



## On Ferocious and Gentle Correspondence Between a Rebel Woman and Worry

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Her name is Aurora. I don't remember if she was wearing a weird sweater the first time we met in my therapy office, but I do know she told me that she "loves herself a weird sweater" which made me pay attention. I couldn't help but be wholly endeared to a person invested in this kind of wardrobe and styled alongside a sense of humour. It gave me a bit of a sense of who she might be; sometimes soft and furry, other times bold, interesting, and unafraid of making a statement. We started with comments on the textures, weaves and knits of sweaters and it led seamlessly to an earnest conversation about some of Aurora's "complaints" (Note: We are using the term "complaint" with reference to its Latin roots: "to speak with lamentation"). She had taken great care to write out these "complaints" in a cherished notebook so they could be studied in their fullness and hairiness – a bit like when weird sweaters leave traces of their fibres behind that end up showing up in all kinds of places. Aurora went on to name her "complaints" about the accusations and finger pointing directed at her honourable name and womanhood. Together we looked at the most noteworthy items such as:

1. "YOU ARE TOO NEGATIVE." This one, Aurora explained, was often followed by well intentioned advice that sounds like: "WHY CAN'T YOU JUST..." (insert: be more positive, not take exception to the unfairness of this moment, be happier, show some gratitude, stop caring so much). Only this was neither easy nor necessarily desirable advice for Aurora to follow. And nevertheless, the sense of failure that followed such accusatory advice-giving sent Aurora to pull her sweater over her eyes.
2. "THAT'S JUST LIFE." This sneaky little diminishment attempted to tell Aurora that complaints are not worth speaking into existence or taking note of at all. "Suck it up." A "good girl" would know how "lucky" she was and not dare muddy the waters by lamenting the shortcomings of a society that presses women to stay docile and compliant.
3. "QUIT BEING SELFISH." Perhaps the worst of the lot, this claim had the ability to unravel all of the deep care Aurora had woven into her relationships. It whispered: "when you do what makes sense for you it is uncharitable and unkind." "When you say NO it is only because you think you are more important than me." "When you refuse an offer for your very own good reasons you are slapping me in the face."

Aurora was sorrowful in her tearful confessions of her labelled failings. Her first request for therapy was for me to help her "be more positive." In taking in this request and further listening to her, I could hear her dissatisfaction and her doubts and questions about these accusations. The friction of such accusations was wearing her down to her very core and she

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began to puzzle out loud what “positivity” might look like against a backdrop of inequity. If I were to endeavor to simply support Aurora in a search for positivity, I feared I would take my place alongside the finger-pointing accusers who shape such messages in the minds of women. In a situation such as this, I would rather side with complaining in lamentation style as a way to learn about her experiences in the world and the questions they had left her with. I wanted to know why others had pointed their fingers at Aurora and how she had managed to express so vividly the ways in which these accusations had left her restless.

It was then and there in my little therapy office that Aurora and I began an inquisitive correspondence with each other through our conversations. These conversations centered what mattered to Aurora and how she had trained her eyes to see beyond the superficial glitter of positivity into the gritty edges of her actual experiences. Our spoken correspondence later took to the page in a “Dear Worry Letter” which I will share with you in this paper.

### **ENTER WORRY: The Filter Free Variety**

Aurora called it “worry.” She described how she felt this worry inside her body like something that would “hollow her out.” She said it settled over her like the slow fade of a dimmer switch of a light and before long she found herself in darkness and feeling blind. Whenever she dared to express this sensation, it was somehow misrepresented by others as a “problem of negativity.” This was not the first time I had heard how a woman’s lived experiences and struggles came to be represented and explained away along the lines of gendered cultural narratives. It has been unnerving to me to see, time and time again, the compounding effects of these master narratives (Lindemann Nelson, 2001) on a woman’s life. In this case, Aurora was compared to iron standards about how women ought to be grateful, uncomplaining, and, most preferably, compliant to the demands of positivity from those around her. The effects of requiring gratitude and positivity also worked to keep Aurora from knowing something about how society was not working in her favour and, in many cases, actively working to keep her silent.

Aurora made this clear to me when describing a moment of feeling a lack of confidence about taking credit for her work and sharing her expertise about a particular project she was working on. When it came time to share information and ideas it was Aurora’s male-counterpart who was asked to give the presentation. As Aurora sat quietly and listened to someone else share the details of her work, she was keenly aware of how his delivery was met with more respect and credibility than hers might be. Is respect granted to those with the most “confidence,” Aurora wondered? And how is the quality named “confidence” bestowed differentially upon different speakers? As Aurora listened, she was keenly aware of information that was missed and inaccurately represented. An internal debate ensued in Aurora’s mind – she worried about her wish to interrupt and how her corrections would be received. How would either her silence or her speaking out affect her reputation? Would she be viewed as loud and interruptive?





Would she make her point clearly and confidently enough? The sense of unfairness to forego credit for her work was hard to bear. In short, the worries about speaking out versus shutting up roared. Aurora's stories of patriarchy-at-work supervised me into imagining the following debate with patriarchy in a young woman's life:

- Patriarchy: Oh, sorry, did you directly and kindly ask someone to respect your work and give you credit? It was kind of hard to hear you....
- Her: Ummm yes, a few times now. I might be doing it wrong since it doesn't seem to be working. It reminds me of the time people would always look to my colleague for answers for my projects or things I know quite a bit about. Like, Hello! I'm right here with a brain full of answers why aren't you listening?
- Patriarchy: I might pay attention to what you are saying if you had more confidence. How about say it with a smile and some positivity sweetheart. I've been overlooking you because you seem so negative. Chill out. Just relax.
- Her: I'm sorry, you are right. I should be more easy-going. I shouldn't be so selfish by trying to hoard credit for my work. I better get going though, because worry is dimming the lights and I won't be able to see my way home. It's like talking to you has really helped me gain awareness about the 101 ways that I have disappointed people and been left out from things. And shit, I can't even tell anyone. I'll come across as negative.
- Patriarchy: Aha! Now you are making some sense. It is selfish to go on about yourself like that or demand airtime for your ideas and research. I prefer to sign off on this kind of stuff.
- Her: HOLD ON A SECOND! Why should I have to ask twice? This isn't right, you have twisted my words and used them against me. You have implanted your finger-pointing accusations to make me think that I don't deserve a voice around the table. It is all becoming clear. You are not right! I AM RIGHT.

I am grateful to Aurora for her astute discernments and rich descriptions as she helped me see past the seductive binary that "worry" is a "simple problem" to be externalized. In our lively correspondence about "worry" in my office, Aurora and I could not afford such simplifications. Together, we held these complications of her lived experiences:

- Sometimes worry served to diminish Aurora's choices for her life.
- Sometimes, worry served to alert Aurora to some ideas that really mattered to her.
- And sometimes, worry served to engage Aurora's mind in endless wavering while at the same time, making decisions for her.





As an example of this, Aurora told me one afternoon how worry was inserting itself into the conundrum of preparing to move out of her parent's home to experience her life as an 'adult.' She had hopes of living with a friend, maybe going travelling overseas, drinking beer on a patio with friends. She was excited about establishing her own rhythms and creating a life for herself. She dreamt of her future with grand visions. Yet, Aurora loved her family deeply. COVID-19 had brought uncertainty about the health of older adults. She found herself trapped in a dark place with questions about mortality. Worry had her questioning if her family understood that she desperately wanted to spend all the time she could with them – having interesting conversations, sharing meals, working out and watching movies. She could not put their health in peril, nor risk being isolated from them.

These worries could not be so simply externalized as a problem. They were a testament to her biggest hopes and her darkest fears. They spoke of what she loved most and detested most in the world. I became convinced that worry was not only a draining pest but a wisdom that had been attempting to guide her into wanting her life to be witnessed as complex and intelligent; embodied and evidenced. This was a multi-problem:

1. She found herself having fewer choices in her life because of worry's persuasive and seductive ways (Don't disrupt the work meeting)
2. She found herself being described as negative when she was thinking critically about systems created to oppress (Don't be upset by unfairness)
3. She found the worry signaled the most valuable things in her life and brought her attention to these treasures (Don't let go of worry)

### **ENTER MY ADMIRATION AND ASTONISHMENT: the kind that makes me wonder**

At this point in our work together, I remember thinking: "Who notices the patriarchy at work so astutely? Who is unwilling to shut up about her dissatisfaction with unequitable systems? Who is so full of thoughts that they bring a small notebook full of important ideas and reflections to share? Who is so tender with their family that they are willing to forego the rite of moving out in a hurry to soak up all the time with her parents? Who is not so easily willing to give up on the gentle guidance of worry, while not allowing it to make her decisions?"

We discovered a history of Aurora's disruption of silencing practices that endeavour to characterize young women as negative and selfish when doing their own bidding. Aurora related a story of her Grandma's witnessing Aurora's stand against her father's advice while in high school. The family was driving in a car and Aurora had been enrolled in a physics class at the urgings of her father. Her father's wishes were well-intentioned with the hopes for Aurora to prepare for a particular career in a particular sector – her life had been planned for her without consultation and assumed authority. Had Aurora been consulted, she would have expressed her abject hatred of this class and her disagreement with these life plans. The plans did not fit with her hopes for a career, nor did they spark an ounce of curiosity in her. As the





family was driving through the city, on an otherwise unremarkable day, Aurora's Dad casually made these life plans casually visible again by commenting on her enrollment in the next level of physics in the year ahead. On this day, Aurora sat tall in the seat of the car and spoke sturdily with great conviction to her father: "I will never take a class like that AGAIN!" Aurora's Grandmother laughed. She was tickled and proud of her granddaughter who would not go along with someone else's ideas. In this moment Aurora's Dad also knew his daughter would be one to speak out and push the envelope.

Beyond Aurora's instruction of me in the ways of resistance to patriarchy (by speaking up and resisting dichotomous externalizations of naming problems as being all bad), she also trained me in the nuance and subtlety of 'gentle rebels' and 'quiet disruptions.' She taught me how it is possible to resist a problem without foregoing her values. Patiently she explained the difference between the stale stock plot (Paljakka, 2020) of a "heroine" vanquishing her worry and instead, pushing its bounds in a gentle way.

This brings me to the heart of this paper, the letter that marked a turning point and a significant way marker to our work. This letter endeavored to document my learnings about Aurora's living and thinking and feeling with worry. After I had poured over her intimate tellings of her life, I felt both desire and duty to create a therapeutic document that would illuminate the deeply tricky problem of the worry alongside her strong refusals to let it make decisions for her. My wish for Aurora was to see her clarity anew. There is, of course, a long and colorful history of writing letters to problems in the literature of narrative therapy (Marsten, Epston, Markham, 2016). In this letter, I am addressing worry inside Aurora's life in Aurora's own voice, as documented by me in my session notes. It was my hope by writing in this way to give Aurora a glimpse of her discernments and her knowings. My hope was to create a moment of "outsight" for Aurora and to momentarily disrupt the lonesome monologue of "insight" (Paljakka, Stout, Saxton, & Carlson, 2020). I wondered about the possibilities that my unique position as witness to Aurora's struggles, pains, hopes, and words afforded us. What if I returned to her and asked her, "Do you hear yourself? Can we listen again to the sound of your knowing? What would our concentrated focus of listening do to the obfuscations of worry? Do you know how you have been teaching me about living? And may I be someone to attempt to tell your stories back to you? Would it be possible to lend you a momentary glimpse of the admiration and respect that my eyes behold your words with?"

I have known such a longing to be witnessed in my own living and speaking. I wondered and worried a little how this letter might meet Aurora's longing about her living and speaking. Here was my attempt at such a letter.

*Dear Worry,*

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*I was just getting ready to establish an ease in my life. Relieve the pressure of a 5 year plan and invest in a new home, but not too far away. Do you want to hold me hostage and keep me in fear? For the generations yet to come may not get to know what they are missing out on. Worry, you bring my treasures so close to my heart it almost hurts. I feel the sting when the clock is ticking. When enjoyment is beyond my reach. When I am running interference.*

*Worry, do they even know that you are a guest in our home? Can they feel your pulsing aliveness when it seems my 20s are being hijacked by a virus that belittles hopes and dreams into bite-sized balls of selfishness? Do they sense you at the dining room table when I anticipate the loneliness of Mom clearing all the dishes by herself again? Do you show up on the steamy mirror after a work-out is done wondering if we may not sweat together for a while? Do they know that in brushing you off with their jokes and good humour that I have fought hard to stay close and keep communication open?*

*Worry, if you had the superpower to propel me toward all that I am trying for, would I find myself enjoying this forced time? Would the rumblings of mortality bring me up against the very stuff of life? Would I choose to hold off in becoming a parent to achieve my career's highest hopes? You are complex worry, filled with subtle nuance playing around with the time/space continuum in my mind. I reject you and then invite you back, because maybe your whispers point out something I am missing?*

*Do you show up with other names making it tricky for me to recognize you? Do you masquerade as conviction, discernment, and daughterly care? Are you under the rule of planfulness, perfect generosity, and sacrifice?*

*I take you seriously and will engage with you transparently. But I will stand up and disrupt you if you try to hollow me out. Can we just be gentle with one another? Maybe for a while?*

*With mixed feelings,*

*Aurora*

What mattered above all else to me about this letter was Aurora's response. I sent her the letter slightly in advance of our scheduled conversation and then we read it over together during our session. The following is a piece of the transcript that captured Aurora's response to me.





- Aurora: Wow (tears) ah. Yah. That's really what I feel and think about worry. That's really well done in terms of articulating it. It's making me emotional because it's so true and reflects exactly...(cry), it's a reflection of me being able to see it in my mind kind of thing. I think the...
- Chelsey: Hold on – can I ask something else...can you say more about the idea that it reflects something. In reading this, is there something different, or I don't know...in reading these expressions, what's the reflection...does that make sense?
- Aurora: I think the reflection would be, just acknowledging that the worry is not, like not that it's not important, but that it's been too over-consuming. It's reflecting on what I've thought in the past and kind of how to rework that for the future almost. Especially the last couple lines: I take you seriously and will engage with you transparently. But I will stand up and disrupt you. Like, instead of like letting me collapse in on myself, knowing that this worry is okay and it's real and it's also almost too much. It's more worry than there should be. But I can use my new found rebelliousness to stop it from being so all encompassing almost. And maybe be more gentle to myself about being so worried about things.
- Chelsey: Would this even be an act of rebellion?
- Aurora: Yah, cuz it's going against what I'm usually okay with, in terms of accepting the worry and being the anxious person that I am. Choosing not to let it take over allows me to have the life that like, I want and want to plan for.

This section of transcript, as well as the conversation that followed, impressed upon me Aurora's capacity to expand her ideas for living beyond the confines of worry while not worrying about being worry-free. What was particularly moving to me, was how Aurora made herself available to the idea of herself as someone with a talent to disrupt normative cultural standards rather than a failed and negative character. Aurora began to see her agency in her purposeful pursuit of rebelliousness to both her internalized experiences of worry as well as her external experiences of evaluation of her womanhood. Aurora started to shape a plan of gentleness into being. Her vision of gentleness as a response to worry, made an impression on me as gentleness is sometimes dismissed as a supposedly passive trait. Aurora proposed a purposeful gentleness as an act of rebellion against norms of "positivity" and "confidence." Gentleness was something that, for Aurora, could "make whole again" what had been labelled as problematic.





### **ENTER DISRUPTION: The kind that takes meaningful actions**

Once the stories of “rebellion” and “disruption” were conceived of and invited Aurora started to create more of them at her workplace if you can believe her audacity. Aurora no longer sits quietly in meetings. She told me with laughter of her decisions to raise a virtual hand and interrupt when she wishes to. Aurora has immersed herself in her work as opposed to the seeking of permissions. She related to me her inventions of her purposeful sentence starters for her calm disruptions: “Well, actually...” or “Let me just add in a few things to what you just said...” Aurora related stories of work trips and networkings with other companies that were driven by curiosity. “Why wouldn’t I take the opportunity to find out what else is going on in the industry,” she asked with sparkling eyes. We negotiated the themes of these stories and Aurora insisted on the words “gentle disruptions” that fit with her quiet observations and her assured firmness of mind. A big smile appeared on her face when this could be written as a win.

Aurora put these winning epiphanies to the test as worry made a new appearance alongside a new manager at her workplace. At our next conversation, Aurora reported that she had decided to take a “proactive approach” to the reappearance of worry. She related to me how she had met with the new manager to share her accomplishments at work and outline her hopes for the role in the coming year. Aurora had purposefully spoken about the projects that excited her and sparked her passions and the investment she had made in studying her areas of interest. Aurora was proud of herself and reported that the conversation went well and that her manager was interested in supporting her with further work that aligned with her areas of interest. Aurora began to see how speaking up countered the expectations of quietness. She also claimed the right to draw attention to her accomplishments without regard to old accusations of selfishness.

In a later session, Aurora came to excitedly report her father’s recent observation that she sounded “like a bit of a rebel!” in her critique of a frustrating communication platform in the workplace that did not allow for direct and transparent interaction. To Aurora, her dad’s exclamation stood as convincing evidence that people could recognize her actions as meaningful beyond “negative complaints.” Aurora related her Dad’s comments to her recent achievement of allowing herself to “have more say” over her own life. Aurora herself exclaimed, “I am not stuck. I can now be mobile and fluid with my thoughts and opinions.”

### **CONCLUSION: ENTER CONFIDENCE- The kind that knows what to do**

As I am writing these lines, Aurora continues to make forays into the conversational realms that would previously freeze her with worry. I happen to know that Aurora was disregarded at a recent performance review meeting. Instead of taking this lack of acknowledgement as a sign of failing at her job, which worry would have previously insisted on as a conclusion, Aurora ventured, in her next team meeting, in her characteristically gentle manner: “Why is my work not being considered as a result of this target?” Aurora claimed this as yet another “push of the boundaries.” In fact, she characterized her own question as “sassy and straight to the point.”







Her boss scurried to respond. I was flabbergasted by this know-how and reminded Aurora about the concerns that initially brought her to therapy. At this, she stated boldly, while smiling mischievously at me, “I guess I can’t say I’m not confident anymore.” I beheld this claim and couldn’t help but notice the bright weird sweater that she was wearing.

