

Body language of the soul: Grace will have to be sufficient

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

When I was a child, I found repetition comforting. No one taught me this. I discovered it on my own, and it seemed to come naturally to me.

Before I fell asleep each night, I would carefully lower my ear onto my pillow and listen for the mysterious sound of footsteps crunching in the snow. I had to hear this sound every night, though I had no idea where it came from. The mystery behind these strange steps was revealed to me as an adult, when one night I heard them again and realized it was the sound of my own pulsing temple magnified through the material of the pillow.

By staring hard into the darkness of my bedroom, I was able to enter some sort of hypnotic state and could conjure up little red and green lights that would fly around the room in neat formations. They looked something like the lights you see after looking at the sun. Normally I could shut my eyes and make them go away, but one night I lost control of them. They multiplied and flew frantically around the room while I hid under the covers, frozen with fear.

That may have been the first time I lost control of this kind of thing. It would not be the last time.

There were other compulsive behaviors. I chewed the insides of my cheeks, the backs of my lips, the sides of my tongue. I bit my nails until my mother insisted that I stop, whereupon I began biting the skin around my nails. Later I picked away dry layers of skin. Occasionally I would pull one too far and cut into the painful red skin below. Then I would vow to stop this insane behavior, but I never could.

I became obsessed with symmetry. If I stepped on a crack with my right foot, I felt an irresistible urge to step on a crack with my left foot. I added more details until this ritual became all-consuming. If I stepped on a pebble with my right heel, I had to step on a pebble with my left heel. If I missed and stepped on the pebble with the

middle of my left foot, I had to step on a pebble with the middle of my right foot while still “owing” my left heel a pebble.

I have read that compulsive behavior is a common way for children to deal with stress and anxiety. If that is true, I must have been a very anxious child, though I didn't think of myself in that way. But I am the first-born son of two first-born parents. I came into this world wired to please. I do remember being fairly consumed with the idea that if I was good enough, everyone would like me and be proud of me.

Praise from grownups was my first drug of choice. The biting, chewing, peeling and stepping were the little things that helped me make it through the day.

That little boy is still with me. These days my compulsive rituals are mostly hidden and do not cause me great problems. I still bite my cheeks and tongue. I still pick at the skin on my fingers, and sometimes I tap out a drumbeat with my teeth. No one knows that I do this because I hide my percussion instrument behind my closed lips.

I have a few Sunday morning rituals that calm me down. I arrange the chairs at church in exactly the same way each week. I even have marks on the floor to help me with this. Occasionally someone offers to help me, but I turn him down if I can get away with it.

I fold the orders of worship in the same way, in the same place and at the same time every Sunday. A dear friend smiles as she watches me folding. She is wise enough not to offer to help. She sees this ritual for what it is—something that calms me down and gets me ready to stand and preach.

It's funny because in many areas of my life I have found peace. I am at peace with the kind of church we have and with our direction and calling in the world. I am at peace with being a pastor of a small congregation with very little influence or power in the world of churches. I am at peace with having a second job to help pay the bills. I am relaxed and at peace with my marriage and my friends and my children.

But I cannot deny that when I am alone, I'm still a teeth-clicking, cheek-biting, skin-picking bundle of tics and funny habits. When no one is watching, the little boy in me comes out, and he is still anxious and fearful about something.

Doctors have suggested that compulsive behavior and anxiety come from a chemical imbalance in the brain. What's needed, they say, is a minor adjustment

with medication. I'm sure there is truth in this way of thinking, but I'm a little hesitant to treat the brain like the carburetor of an old car. While medication may help, I also believe that behavior is the body language of the soul. Everyone has a "tell." The way you act tells the truth about you.

So what do these little compulsions say about me? It's interesting that a good number of my compulsive behaviors only occur on Sunday mornings. I wonder if down in the depths of my soul, I am afraid of God. Perhaps the small boy inside me still feels that he must earn the approval of the big father figure in heaven.

Yes, even as I write this I can feel the truth of it ringing in my heart.

I once preached a sermon entitled "Swallow Grace and Sweat Mercy." I said that if you really swallowed the New Testament idea of grace, you would sweat mercy and God's peace. The fruit of the Spirit would ooze out of your very pores. You could not hide it.

I preached that sermon after I lined up all the chairs and made sure that all the hymnals were facing the same way. Isn't that hilarious? I proclaim God's peace from the pulpit even as I seek it in my own life. God love us preachers. There is no way we can ever live up to our words. For an honest proclaimer, this is a real cross to bear. A real thorn in the flesh. I've asked the Lord more than three times to remove this particular thorn from me and make my life as peaceful as my words.

So far there has been some limited improvement, but yes, grace will have to be sufficient for me.

Sometimes I wish I could find the little boy inside me who is still chewing and peeling and needing the chairs to be in perfect rows. I'd like to set him on my lap and see him biting his cheeks and drumming his feet on my leg in a perfectly symmetrical rhythm. Right foot—1,2,3. Left foot—1,2,3.

I'd be wise enough not to ask him what he is afraid of. He couldn't tell me. Neither would I tell him he has nothing to fear. I think he knows that, but it doesn't seem to matter.

I suppose I would put my arms around him and tell him that he is a cute and lovable and quirky child, and that I like him just as he is. And then I would close my eyes and let the rhythm of his beating feet lull me to sleep. I love the sound and feel of little

feet drumming against my leg.

And with my eyes half closed and my defenses down, perhaps I would be able to hear the voice of my Father in heaven, who loves me as I am and leads me along the winding path of this spiritual journey.

“Do not worry, Gordon, when you realize that you have not yet arrived. After all, there would be no journey if you had nowhere left to go.”