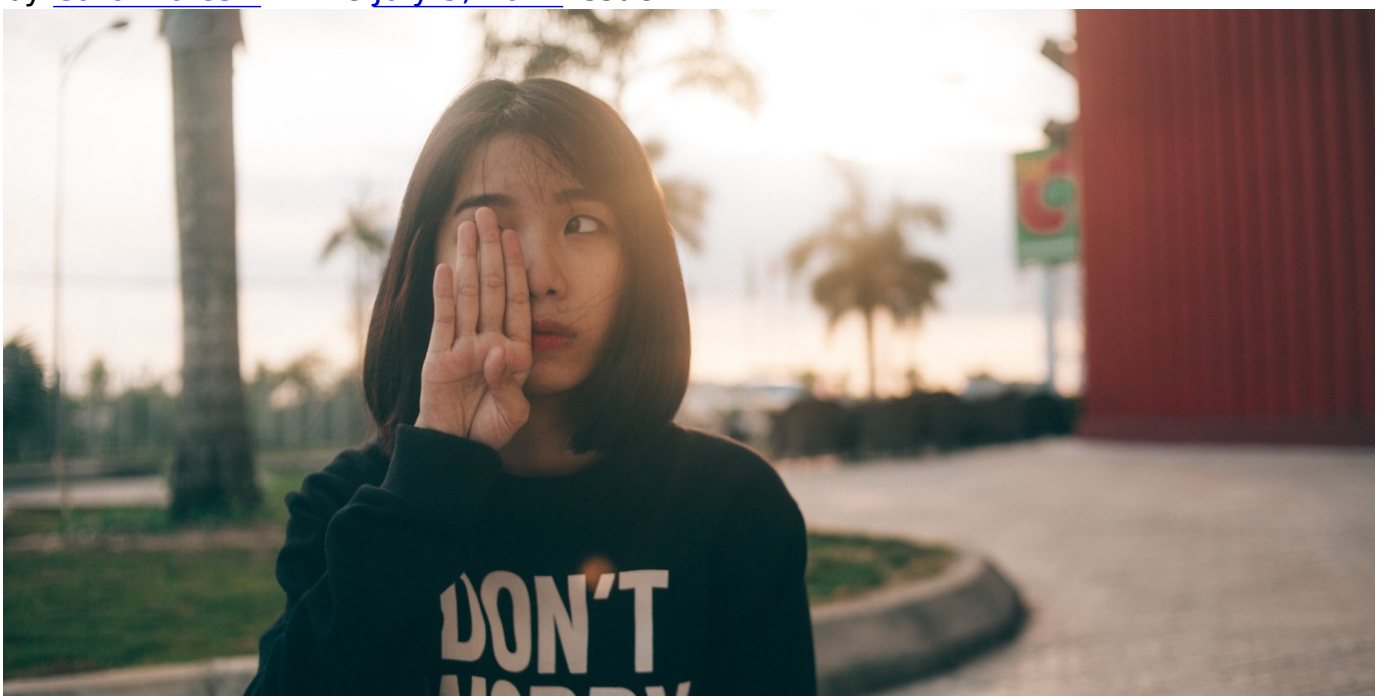
Anxious about anxiety

How can we overcome our anxiety? And should we even try?

by Carol Zaleski in the July 5, 2017 issue



A few weeks ago, after many landlocked years, I stood upon a cold, empty, windy beach looking out at the vast expanse of ocean and sky. It was as if a heavy curtain had lifted—perhaps the “sensuous curtain” of which the idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley used to speak—for as I gazed at the unencumbered horizon, a burden of restless anxiety fell away. The thought came to me then that it is in our power, God willing, to replace fear with love, anxiety with joy, and busyness with service.

Such fleeting impressions aren’t much use if they are only interruptive. Was there a way to preserve it? I chanced to look down and notice a mottled blue-grey stone at my feet. It had a smooth indentation, much like the Neanderthal chopper in our curio cabinet at home, so that it fit perfectly into my hand. As I held the stone, I anchored it to the resolution (or better yet, petition) that filled my mind: *replace fear with love, anxiety with joy, busyness with service*. I’ve kept the stone as a talisman.

But here's the puzzle: Should we be trying to overcome anxiety? As wise teachers have always recognized, ordinary anxiety is a rational response to life's uncertainties, a side effect of the vigilance and forethought that set us apart from beasts, babies, and perhaps our hominid ancestors as well. It's good to temper our anxiety, but there's no use being anxious about it. We can be calm when we're dead.

The puzzle deepens when we consider the Christian spiritual tradition. On the one hand, merely anodyne solutions are ruled out. The psalms, prophets, and wisdom books remind us that we are like the beasts that perish, destined to live in a world where the nations rage, the wicked prosper, the just are persecuted, and the innocent betrayed; moreover, the New Testament puts us on high alert for the Day of the Lord. On the other hand, the scriptures assure us that the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who is our refuge, our shepherd, our fortress, and our rock, will keep us safe, body and soul, from deadly peril. "Do not be anxious about your life," Jesus tells his disciples, "which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? . . . consider the lilies of the field . . . do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself" (Matt. 6:25–34). Coming from a friend, these could be words of tender reassurance; from a philosopher, a wise counsel to accept one's limitations; from a monk, a brief for asceticism. But when Jesus says, "Do not be anxious," it amounts to a command. We are simply being ordered not to worry—an impossible task were we not simultaneously given the grace to fulfill it: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you" (John 14:27, RSV).

Writing from prison, conscious of his mortal danger, St. Paul shares the peace of Christ with his beloved friends in Philippi: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6–7, RSV).

Here is the charter for a complete rewiring of the human psyche: *replace fear with love, anxiety with joy, busyness with service*. Thus the 17th-century Jesuit saint Claude de la Colombière could say, "My God, I am so intimately convinced that thou dost watch over all those who hope in thee, and that we can want for nothing while we expect all from thee, that I am resolved to live without anxiety in the future, casting all my care on thee."

But the peace that passes understanding is compatible with a great deal of anguish here below. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Søren Kierkegaard has his pseudonymous narrator tell us that “every human being must learn to be anxious in order that he might not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety. Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.”

What I take this to mean is that we should allow the undercurrent of anxiety to surface long enough to awaken humility, repentance, and awe in the face of the divine mystery. In this sense, the opposite of anxiety is not peace but dullness, stagnation, complacency, estrangement. Anxiety is the “vertigo of freedom,” Kierkegaard says, and it is in the grip of this vertigo that we become receptive to the peace that the world does not give.

The secular existentialists who counted Kierkegaard as their forerunner exaggerated the vertigo of freedom and made a shibboleth of *Angst*. They could not pray as Kierkegaard does in an 1840 journal entry, “To Thee, O God, we turn for peace . . . but grant us too the blessed assurance that nothing shall deprive us of that peace, neither ourselves, nor our foolish, earthly desires, nor my wild longings, nor the anxious cravings of my heart.” This is the promise Christians bank on: however anxiety may persist, it shall not prevail against the peace we have been given.

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