NERVOUS SYSTEMS

Spiritual Practices to Calm Anxiety in Your Body, the Church, and Politics

SARA BILLUPS

"*Nervous Systems* is a special book, marked both by prophetic courage and generous compassion. Sara Billups masterfully takes her reader by the hand and honors the deep complexity of what it means to be human and follow Jesus in a world like ours. This is a thoughtful, challenging, and hopeful read."

Aundi Kolber, MA, LPC, therapist and author of *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*

"I recently heard friend and trauma therapist Ryan Kuja say that the autonomic nervous system has two basic functions: to protect and to connect. And I remember thinking how often those roles seem to be at odds. How often we crave peace and belonging but find only war within ourselves.

Through thoughtful inquiry and prose you can taste, Sara Billups invites us to attune to the individual and collective anxiety we carry beneath the skin and to enlarge our communal imagination for how protection and connection can waltz together, in their own clunky but compelling kind of way.

For all of us who have been holding our breath, anxious about what we might lose in the exhale, *Nervous Systems* invites us to be settled. This book is deeply human, generous, relevant to our current moment, and thrumming with possibility for we who crave peace in our veins, not someday but here and now."

Sarah Westfall, author of *The Way of Belonging*

"An extraordinary—and extraordinarily wide-ranging—tour through the valleys of anxiety that shape so much of modern life, *Nervous Systems* brims with rare candor, wisdom, and humor. So practical too! Billups makes for an ideal guide for thorny terrain: open yet anchored, humble yet unafraid to interrogate uncomfortable truths about herself and others. The result is a book that exudes not just insight and courage but grace. The sparkling prose doesn't hurt either. I loved it."

David Zahl, author of *Low Anthropology* and *The Big Relief*

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"*Nervous Systems* is a one-of-a-kind book that the church desperately needs right now. With ancient, sacramental wisdom, Sara Billups delivers a hope-filled perspective on modern anxieties many of us find ourselves wrestling with. This book is pure prophetic poetry!"

Rev. Joash P. Thomas, author of *The Justice of Jesus*

"Perhaps we're living through the most anxious time in the world's history. So many of us experience daily overwhelm in our bodies, in the Christian church, and in the political forces in our lives. This is a book for the anxious ones, a companion for all of us who long for sturdy faith amid our teetering minds, disconnected bodies, or frazzled sense of the world's dangers. Sara Billups writes that even when her anxiety refused to dissipate, 'God met [her] repeatedly in its very presence.' Who better than Sara to guide us toward faith that flourishes alongside our collective and personal unease?"

Micha Boyett, author of *Blessed Are the Rest of Us*

"Sara's writing is poetic and honest, naming the lived experiences of so many. She creatively addresses the topic of anxiety and manages to write about it in a way that leaves the reader feeling hopeful, offering practical tools and perspectives. *Nervous Systems* feels like a helpful peek into the lives of so many who find themselves in an in-between space, including everyday Christians, not just the ones we see represented in the media. Sara writes with such vulnerability, talking about her own experiences with anxiety, caring for aging parents, parenting, and grappling with what it is to be a follower of Jesus in our current cultural context. *Nervous Systems* explores things we all grapple with, and as I read it, I couldn't help but think of people I pastor and friends, Christian and non, who will immensely benefit from the timeliness of Sara's words; I can't wait to get it in their hands."

Kimberly Deckel, priest, pastor, and social worker

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Orphaned Believers

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For Sue

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When you are a child who believes your brain can keep planes from crashing, it's imaginative and precocious. When you're an adult who thinks your own churning mind is what keeps everything safe, it's called anxious.

Mary Laura Philpott, *Bomb Shelter*

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Introduction

My father and my father's father were anxious. I was worried over before I was born. I came into this world with that inheritance. A bottle-fed meal of inherited and observed anxiety. Then I took what I'd been given and made it my own.

Everyone I know is worried about something, and most of the Christians I know find little comfort in Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry" (Matt. 6:25) like a bird or a flower.

Jesus, stop pouring salt on the wound, we might think. *Stop making it sound so easy. Clearly you didn't live in a time like we do, in a mental health crisis and through several geopolitical conflicts and a global pandemic, which only calcified our differences.* As Krista Tippett said about the years we're living through, "You could make an argument that our entire societal nervous system was stressed."[1]

If Jesus said to not worry, I believe he meant it. But two thousand years later, I could not experience peace. This pain point—the dissonance between the head reading "do not

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worry" and the heart worrying—was the one I wanted to understand.

I began to think about the question culturally, as a Christian considering her place in the American church and the local congregation. Like many of us, I want to see what is broken in the church—and America—healed. But we're far from where we want to be.

And so, I began to read. Studying recent reporting and cultural analysis, and even my own unpublished journals, I set out to understand the cultures and stereotypes swaying American Christian identity so that I could try to find and offer hope in the face of personal anxieties and the anxieties of our frenetic culture.

How Did We Get Here?

In *A Non-Anxious Presence*, author and pastor Mark Sayers writes that as technology expands, anxiety follows, affecting us personally and collectively. "Just as the modern world brings technological breakthroughs, advancements in science, and greater individual freedoms, it also creates anxiety. Anxiety is viewed as an individual ailment, and indeed many experience it as such. However . . . there is a structural element to anxiety."[2]

Sayers points to the Industrial Revolution as an example. "As the world in the nineteenth century took its first technological steps to become a global village, anxiety birthed a whole raft of new and previously never before encountered illnesses. . . . Men suffered from what was named 'brain fevers,' 'brainstorms,' and 'nervous exhaustions.'"[3] Women were diagnosed with the gendered "hysteria." The market

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responded, Sayers writes, including the beginning of self-help, and "rests, retreats, vegetarianism, and vacations rushed into vogue among those suffering from suffocating anxiety. Yet little seemed to work."[4]

The pandemic was its own revolution, not one in which we industrialized but rather were decommissioned. It could have been different.

The Australian musician and writer Nick Cave says the pandemic was a window where things might have gotten better, "but we blew it. We squandered it. Early on, many of us felt that a chance was presented to us, as a civilisation, to put aside our vanities, grievances and divisions, our hubris, our callous disregard for each other, and come together around a common enemy. . . . To our shame this didn't happen. The Right got scarier, the Left got crazier, and our already fractured civilisation atomised into something that resembled a collective lunacy."[5]

My own collective lunacy got loonier and sadder and more melancholic during the pandemic. The night we knew Covid was here felt like we had moved into a haunted house. We pretended the noises were explainable for a week or two. Then the apparition, the phase beyond denial. We saw the Covid ghost in Seattle before other parts of the country. I panicked and called a calm friend in Michigan from the upstairs bathroom. I had asthma. I had old and ill parents. I had kids that needed to learn during the day while I worked.

A group of PTA moms had gathered at the park earlier in the week and predicted school would close for the rest of the year. They were forming some sort of co-op learning pod, and I was asked for my email. "You're joking," I said. I had the old feeling that I was missing something. School

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would just be canceled for a few days, I was certain. But the night I called my friend, I felt foolish for being in the fog of denial a couple of days longer than my neighbors. I sat on the bathroom floor and prayed with her, and somehow her being OK made me less claustrophobic.

Then George Floyd was killed. And my husband, Drew, heard a story of a mother whose son had been given "The Talk" before even a sex talk, but he had been splayed across a police car at twelve anyway. Drew is not a crier. He came upstairs weeping.

Writer Sofia Onte said, "Truth is, I'm tired."[6] As white people living middle-class lives in a white-led world, Drew and I were not trying to pretend we understood the weariness of a person of color. Instead, we were always on the precipice of crying in those months as the depth of the racism we didn't know was in our hearts surfaced. On June 5, 2020, our local station KEXP aired eight minutes and forty-six seconds of silence at 8:46 a.m. to represent the number of minutes and seconds it was initially reported that George Floyd's neck was crushed. We sat on the couch and listened to the silence, the kids in a stream of light. My son's hair looked even blonder then.

Instead of feeling anxious, for a little while during the summer of America's racial reckoning I was buoyed by the need to "get to work," personally and collectively. But it didn't take long until I slipped back into an ambiguous worry. A generalized sense that the color, slant of light, and posture of my motivation to do something was off. Misaligned.

I watched Black Lives Matter protests over my phone on the porch that summer, in the dark next to the screen. The

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big trees and clean air were still as I saw braver people get tear-gassed in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. I wondered if I should go downtown. I didn't know where to place the heaving worry that kept my hands holding a small screen. I was taught how to worry, I realized, but not how to protest. My heart wanted to be there, but in my anxiety, all I could see were green comic-book poofs of coronavirus, like neon clouds hovering over the heads in the crowd.

Then the insurrection, the 2020 election. It was a time I knew we would talk about later. A "where were you when MLK was assassinated" or "when 9/11 happened" series of events. The years 2020 and 2021 felt like history being made, and there was some hope that we could learn from it as it was happening instead of in retrospect. Eventually, the sense that my anxiety could somehow be productive by tapping into a collective move toward social change fizzled in me. It fizzled because I had the luxury of not being burdened with any real threat to my well-being. I was tired, so I took a break because I could. By the time the 2024 election took place, my anxious and exhausted Christian peers and I scrambled to make sense of what could not be denied: America is more deeply divided by party line than anyone wants to believe, and we're facing a dangerous and uncertain future. "Do not worry" sounded less relevant than ever.

Looking for Answers

Maybe you know anxiety well as the buzz in your brain that won't turn off when you're supposed to be asleep.[7] Maybe you know it as the chronic notification checking for the next email, the next "like," or the next headline. Anxiety often

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includes fear of the unknown.[8] It casts a net into the future, mulling over and catastrophizing about what might happen. Anxiety is primal, the reptilian brain reacting to perceived threats. In a sense, anxiety is a good thing when it is preventative. Anxiety serves us throughout life by warning us, and the idea is not to turn it off but rather to turn the volume knob down to a reasonable level.

Not all eras are anxious like this one. The broader, universal reasons—the rapid expansion of generative AI, the impact of social media on our psyches, the market cloaked as wellness culture—are easy to identify. External stressors are coming at all of us—politics, church, family, and financial stress. But more interesting to me are the reasons why the anxiety they bring gets into our systems and blooms in the first place. What I am trying to understand in these pages is how to be present in an era of pervasive personal and collective anxiety.

My first book, *Orphaned Believers*, looked back on the seismic forces of end-times culture, culture wars, and consumerism in the '80s and '90s and how they shook the American church. In *Nervous Systems*, our vantage point is on the here and now, our current dis-ease. We'll explore how anxiety manifests in three areas—the body, the church body, and the body politic—to better understand its source and find healthy resources in the Christian story that serve as antidotes to personal and systemic worry.

First, the body. This is my story but not my anxiety alone. I wanted to understand both the anxiety we carry in our bodies and in the bodies of people we love. I'll use my own story to compare and contrast with yours around mental and physical

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health: the anxiety from our family of origin, caregiving for aging parents, and wellness culture.

My son, a young member of Gen Z, began to navigate intrusive thoughts and scrupulosity when he started middle school, and it did not take long for me to see these themes, until then undiagnosed, in myself. I hear about this pattern in stories shared by other parents more and more. One friend received a late-in-life autism diagnosis after her son was diagnosed. Another, ADHD after his kid. And my goodness, are our kids anxious.

A 2023 Deloitte survey of more than twenty-two thousand Gen Z and Millennial respondents found that "nearly half of Gen Zs and four in 10 millennials feel stressed or anxious all or most of the time, with women and other under-represented groups most impacted."[9] A 2023 Gallup and Walton Family Foundation survey found that only 47% of Gen Z reports that they are "thriving in their lives." This is among the lowest percentage across all generations in the U.S.[10] As I read these stats, the faces of kids I've known since they were babies who are struggling as young adults ran through my mind like a photo flip-book.

Second, the church. The American church was a place of stability—or at least carried the myth of stability as the unquestioned center of society—for a long time. That shifted in the 1960s onward, when the center didn't hold. Church leaders became burned out and increasingly sidelined, congregants in the pews felt burned out and sidelined, and the Moral Majority capitalized on those feelings, platforming culture wars to avert our tired eyes. Many pastors and clergy made insular choices to stay in power and cloak abuse motivated

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by anxiety. And others capitalized on the gut-level worry of their parishioners.

The church is a system causing anxiety and impacting mental health when it should be a place of rest. The radical call of Jesus to live in and not of the world? I began to wonder how we'd gotten it all wrong. Instead of being set apart, we've overcorrected to either withdraw from or immerse ourselves in a Christian culture that is often not really about Jesus but about our quest to be safe and accepted. As a Christian considering her place in the capital-C church and the story of my local congregation, I wanted to understand church anxiety, not to burn down but to build up.

Third, the political. Our anxiety acutely manifests in political polarization. While each generation has had their own flavor of culture war issues and dysfunction in Washington, DC, our current taste is especially sour. The people in the US make up a body politic—a collective group of citizens—that is in turn governed via politicians representing states that are the cherriest red or the inkiest blue. Especially after the 2024 election, I wondered if the brokenness of politics could be less ultimate in our lives while staying engaged and aware of policies and actions that affect people who are marginalized and oppressed.

Bigger Than Us

I've plumbed the forces shaping my anxiety. I recognize that many are familiar and common, like caregiving for elders in a culture that doesn't value them and navigating changes in the body in midlife. Beyond our individual experiences, we all encounter systemic anxiety that comes from various

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structures and organizations such as evangelicalism, in which I was raised.

There are threats outside the body that our immune system is trying to defend against, but instead, as therapist and rabbi Edwin Friedman says, the immune system "can be perverted to attack the host."[11] Outside threats are systemically overwhelming our cultural immune system, and it isn't working properly. Anxieties particular to evangelicalism may be less familiar to readers who were raised in a different faith tradition or no particular tradition. But you don't have to have grown up in the church or identify as a Christian to understand how the social and political forces within the sanctuary continue to impact our broader cultural moment.

An Invitation to Hope

My parents are trying to keep living in bodies that are failing them. My life is maxed with responsibilities. The world is falling apart. And yet, I am literally less anxious. There is only one explanation. Well, I suppose there could be two. The first may be that I am numbed out, be it from a substance use disorder or a reality television addiction, and I am so numb I am detached. Or the second, which is what I believe to be true, is that instead of clenching down and waiting for the affliction to pass, I have found that God can meet us in the presence of anxiety and change us.

Writer Kate Bowler said, "Most of the things that build our lives are the things that can come apart at any moment."[12] Ah, there it is: The root of my own anxiety is the belief I carry that something could unexpectedly be swept away in an instant—health, ability, life itself.

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Maybe you think two things at this point. First, this book will be a real downer. I've attempted to write about personal and systemic anxiety with levity. Not to diminish, but to nourish. Second, I'm writing with my own anxiety, which is and has always been centered around the body, and that is too different from yours. Yours is about a friend maybe, or a kid, or the environment, or the workweek. I worried about that too when I set out to write this book. But I hope I've dug down enough to get to the bottom of the ice-cream tub of worry, and that whatever the flavor, we're both in the same cardboard container. Letting go of the grip of our anxiety, whatever its variety, happens right where we are and is formed by the complexity of our own stories and the world around us.

There are some things that take a long time to pinpoint in ourselves. But when I sat down to write about my anxiety, I discovered the same themes had been circling for months, even years—these questions of the body, the church body, and the body politic—but I was trying to get at them in different ways. Through understanding these major forces impacting my anxiety, I wanted to comprehend some things personal and universal about control, affliction, and ultimately faith.

The more I thought about the personal, the church, and the political anxiety of our era, the more my central tension crystallized: Jesus said to not worry, but it does not seem possible to live in our world free of personal and pervasive systemic anxiety. The two postures—Jesus's calm and our worry—did not seem reconcilable. They weren't, until something changed in my own heart.

In my midforties, I started the Spiritual Exercises, a nine-month-long Ignatian "retreat." The Exercises are traditionally

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conducted in a month of intense prayer and contemplation; I opted for a modified version of the Exercises centered in an hour of morning prayer. Here, I learned more about the posture of holy indifference, and as I did, I discovered something that I can pass on to you that does not require a month of retreating. I noticed that the more I pried open my hands toward a posture of acceptance, the less I worried.

At first, I pat its head, my burgeoning sense of calm. *You're cute*, this calm feeling, like a scruffy mutt at the back door. Then, the more I read, the further into the Exercises I go, the more I begin to tolerate my anxiety. We go on occasional walks, me and my calm companion. Soon enough, I tap my hand on the bed, and the dog jumps up, sighing and settling. Even in sleep, when before I would wake up with a racing heart, I am more at peace now; a warm body sleeps at my feet.

On a bad night, up and worried, I go to the bathroom and stand under a skylight. The light of the moon is on my hands. I sense God saying, "Moonlight is a different kind of light." Even in the dark, there is a soft, pearly light that is nothing like the sun that throws itself against the wall, the skin.

Jesus said, "Do not worry," and I believe he meant it. To say it plainly: My anxiety did not dissipate. Instead, God met me repeatedly in its very presence.

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PART ONE

THE BODY

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1

Leans Anxious

My heart at midlife was restless in three places—at least. Its chambers hummed with anxiety: A line drawn straight until the hand holding the pencil trembles. An EKG machine spreadsheeting inky dips after each beat. A seismograph measuring low earthquakes you can feel, but barely. I naturally run at a 2.5 magnitude level of worry, maybe a three.

First, I was anxious about fathers. Men had both helped and harmed me. Church fathers and dads. Heavenly fathers and strange uncles. I grew up with a father who was impulsive but still loving. There were men in the first half of my life whom I wanted to be like, I wanted to be with, and I wanted to avoid. Godly men, dangerous men, bookish men, addicted men.

Second, I was anxious about mothers. Women had both helped and harmed me. I grew up with a mother who could be hot or cold but was usually fun. Once we danced on top of a mold of cherry Jell-O on the kitchen floor. I can still feel the

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squish. There were women in the first half of my life whom I wanted to look like, I wanted to befriend, and I wanted to avoid. Sunday school women, artistic women, homeschooled women, intellectual women.

Third, I was anxious about supporting my parents and taking care of my kids. I had already learned a thing or two about caregiving by my forties. I had seen the changing shapes, colors, and forms of anxiety that began in childhood and had traced a pencil line from being a daughter, to mothering, to caring for my mother and father. In the first half of my life, I had wanted to untangle from my parents but still nap on their overstuffed couch on the weekend. For a season in my twenties, I'd call on Sundays and see them at Christmas. Eventually, when parenting my own daughter and son, I needed Mom and Dad's help and took as much of it as they could give. When they needed me as they aged, I frequently felt guilty about how often I was not available to them.

Ever-Present Anxiety

Almost seven million adults in the US have generalized anxiety disorder.[1] If we are not anxious, someone we love is probably wrestling with worry. Some of us have experienced anxiety from a young age. Others develop anxiety later in life, be it from a specific inciting incident or a growing, gnawing feeling of dread. Sometimes age gives us more knowledge, technique, and perspective about anxiety, but it also delivers more opportunities for disillusionment.

A 2023 television series called *Lucky Hank* depicts a professor who is flailing in midlife. Hank's college bookstore doesn't carry his book. He has no interest in and, at times,

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disdains his writing students. He would not join a club that would have him as a member, that old Groucho Marx trope. The series ran for one season before it was canceled. Apparently, there is only so much wallowing a viewer can handle.

In the pilot episode, Hank tells his wife he is typically 80 percent worried or anxious. His wife says most people run at 30 or 40 percent. She says her anxiety is at 30.[2] Their chasm widens. I am closer to Hank than his wife, anxious in perpetuity. I lean anxious. My anxiety is a cocktail of genetic predisposition and learned behavior garnished with a maraschino cherry of cultural anxiety sunk to the bottom of the glass.

Physician and writer Dr. Jen Gunter says that anxiety disorders are as real as any physical condition such as high blood pressure or strep throat.[3] They also make plenty of room for creative thinking. When you are worrying, what does your brain look like? If I could see inside my brain when worrying, I imagine it would be highlighter yellow, maybe Hi-C Ecto Cooler green. Channels in the brain carry a glowing flood of anxiety between the mind and body—lightning in a cloud brain with neon threads of adrenaline.

To calm a heart racing from worry, there are at-home remedies that a Google search will tell you to try. Run an ice cube across your wrists; cold water can shock the senses and lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. It's a localized version of pouring a bucket of ice water over the head of a drunk college student. Wake the hell up, kid.

Other remedies you can try: Eat something small and sweet, maybe a piece of hard candy. Grandma candy, like a Werther's Original or Butter Rum LifeSavers. Smell perfume or essential oil, ideally something nostalgic. Breathe in the

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shape of a box: inhale for five seconds at the top left corner, hold your breath for five to the top right side, exhale down the right side for five seconds, and hold your breath to connect the box to the bottom left corner for the final five; repeat a few times. Take a walk outside.

Anxious Within the Quiet

Sometimes being outside helps me. Other times, I most clearly sense the disquiet within me when it contrasts with nature, though the drive to it often provides a sense of calm. There is a curve on I-90 from Seattle when Mount Si comes into view. I've only climbed to the top once, but I've passed it on the interstate a hundred times. There is something grounding about proportionality, about seeing something larger than your own life for a moment. The grounding I get driving there doesn't last. Walking along a path with leftover patches of snow near the base of Si, I pull up a layer of moss and press my palm into the dirt. Underneath avoidance and distraction, there is a pull toward natural quiet. But when I'm flared, my always-on anxiety is amplified by the stillness instead of soothed by it.

As I hike, as in my everyday life, I worry about wars overseas, national and local politics, issues in my city, the future of the American church, the people in my church, my kids' schools, my two kids. These worries are not random. I have been clinically diagnosed with generalized anxiety, and my fear of uncertainty and lack of control most often manifest in one specific area: health anxiety.

My mind is the ultimate empath that can take information about other people's health issues and re-create their physical

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symptoms. You should see me in action. I can physically vibrate with worry. My breast hums. My lip hums. If you have restless leg syndrome, I will have it tomorrow. If your head is splitting with a migraine, mine will have a dull ache in a few hours. If your eye flutters like a hummingbird and you comment on it over coffee, I will match your twitch with an optical migraine.

Walking through the woods, I ask myself who I would be without anxiety. Would I recognize myself? Would the absence of anxiety be a clear gain? Or would it also represent the loss of something in me I don't really want to be without?

I once jotted down something my spiritual director, Dan, said in a session about my shadow side. Long before Dan mentioned it, Carl Jung, the founder of analytic psychology, wrote about the shadow side, which is the area where emotion is hidden or repressed. Human beings need to understand their shadows in order to become emotionally whole.

During our appointment, Dan said, "Sara, what if anxiety is the shadow side of deep care. If you didn't care, you wouldn't worry." I usually appreciate when a person I trust names something in my life that I can't see for myself. "Yes," I said, thinking about it. "If I wasn't so anxious, I wonder if I would be as faithful to people I love? I also think my creativity is linked to my anxiety; they're different sides of the same coin. If I was not anxious, would I have the same imagination?"

Not Your Thoughts

Sometimes, I am loyal to my anxiety, and in a way, I love it because I have conflated anxiety with myself. We are smashed

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together, layers of baklava dough collapsed into each other. Break me in two and you could see the lines.

I think about feelings, about how everyone says "we are not what we feel," that we are more than just the sum of our emotions. I partially believe this. To the extent that I do believe it, I'm unclear on how to separate myself from the things I feel.

One possible source of insight presented itself. I read a *Psychology Today* feature called "You Are Not Your Thoughts."[4] The article encourages me to "watch" my thoughts and differentiate the observer, me, from the idea. It occurred to me that maybe the principles in the article apply to both thinking and feeling.

"Try this," the article suggests. "Think, I cannot lift my arms above my head, and while you think this, actually raise your arms above your head (if you are physically capable). Now try this: think, I cannot stand on one leg, and while you think this (again if you are able), stand on one leg. Notice that the connection between thinking and doing is illusory. We can easily think about one thing and do another. . . . Your mind is not in charge. You are!"[5]

I "watch" myself feel unconvinced and awkward after reading the article, the character equivalent of a mom having a midlife crisis listening to a self-help tape in her car. But maybe this thought is not in charge either.

"What's Important to You?"

My anxiety therapist, also named Sara, is one of my favorite people. It's part of some ethics code that you can't be friends with your therapist. If we were real friends, connected outside of a professional therapist-client relationship, she could

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probably become uncredentialed. So I imagine coming across her at dinner, at a brewery in the Central District, eating fries and drinking an IPA. She is laughing with her husband. He is holding their baby in a carrier, and there is a well-behaved dog at their feet. I wonder what to do in this scenario, and I decide to walk by and quickly smile but not talk to her in real life.

Running into your therapist is like running into a teacher outside of school. Once, I saw my fifth-grade teacher at the drugstore, buying shampoo. And it was unbelievable. Because teachers are in school. Don't they live in school? Maybe there is a cot in the supply room where they sleep? They are our teachers, and they have no business buying shampoo. They are famous to us, the wonderful, tender bosses of us. We are the center of their lives. How can a teacher function without her students?

I would not talk to Sara if I ran into her getting a beer or buying shampoo. Yet I tell her about my darkest corners. Sara and I meet once every few weeks and talk about my health anxiety where I am grateful that I can budget for these regular sessions. I tell her things that I am sure will bring her to a new level of shock and concern. Like, "press the button and sound the alarm, drop the professional lingo about cognitive behavior therapy" concern. The kind of concern that warns her, *This woman is actually freaking nuts.*

Sara tells me to think of the things I could do with my time instead of worrying. "What's important to you? Imagine a future where you're not anxious about your body," she says. "I would spend time with my family and write," I tell her easily.

The idea is to picture how much more spacious life could be if I didn't exhaust exponential energy on anxiety. But that

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concept implies I can bucket my thoughts like I do activities in my day: go for a jog, write a little, pray. I can assign time slots to those things, thirty-minute brackets. My anxiety is not time-slottable. It is a hum, like the radio always on low while I drive or make dinner. I cannot take the time back that anxiety requires from me because it is meshed into the moments of my day. Jesus said to not worry, to be like the birds and the flowers. That sounds very ambitious; I just wanted a little relief.

Eventually, I began to accept that my thoughts are only things that pass through and can limit as much as free me. But I still could not let go of a sense that my closeness to God hinges on my thinking about God, about whether God is near. My feeling close to God or not close to God is very much about me as the main character. I wonder why I take myself so seriously.

The Gospel of Luke says that when we give good things, good things will be given. In the end, when all things are made well, "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (6:38). An abundance of oil from ripe olives. Surely, this is Jesus the redeemer. Jesus the liberator. Jesus the revelator. I read these things and, feelings aside, started to believe them. There are only so many dead ends you reach before you let a little bit go. What a relief to know it was never about us in the first place.

The Myth of Control

By the time I turned forty-five, the low-magnitude rumble of my lifelong anxiety moved into the Big One, a yearslong quake triggered by the health crises of my parents, who are

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now in their seventies and unwell. My father was diagnosed with a treatable but not curable cancer the first summer of the pandemic and given three and a half years to live based on his age and staging. It has been three years and two months. My mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease nine years ago and more recently dementia. She progressed slowly for a long time, but her condition declined quickly once my father received his diagnosis. She began to experience paranoia and psychosis, seeing people who weren't there at all hours of the day. She often saw two Dads. "Isn't one enough?" I asked her once, trying to bring levity to the situation. Her eyes got huge like she was scared. Then, she huffed a little laugh.

My parents are swan diving together, hand in hand, and I would be flattened if I tried to catch their fall. Dad's body is failing, and Mom's mind is failing. Dad's mind was impacted by a stroke that also caused a broken hip two years ago, compounding his cancer with other maladies, including blood clots and mysterious falls that required hospitalization. He's always been anxious, but he had become depressed and lost much of his impulse control. One night Dad woke up and saw someone else in the bathroom, then the mirror. My parents either do not recognize themselves or they multiply themselves.

I am both like and unlike my parents. I chase the myth of control, but I am not outwardly compulsive. I often carry a sense that while nothing is wrong, nothing is truly right. When I was a kid, Dad worried and Mom made things better. Now, I am a mother and can see both of their qualities—worrier and soother—in me as I parent. My anxiety manifests in my body like a weight, and sometimes the pressing of the

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palm of affliction is heavier than others. At times, I resist. Occasionally, I sense the drag to be horizontal.

Sitting at my desk, I imagine a magnet pulling me off the chair and onto the carpet. In the kitchen, I cook something, but in my mind, I am lying down as I fry an egg. I drive on an errand and imagine a big brass bed on the side of the road with a frilly blanket. It is Stevie Nicks–style, a cinematic bed from the 1970s. I picture myself pulling the car over and crawling under the sheets.

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