

I was thinking about giving a lecture on either modern anxiety and faith or rethinking the language of modern faith, but in the end I couldn't choose, and you'll notice that the topics bleed into each other about halfway through what I have to say. Perhaps that's inevitable. Perhaps you can't talk about the one, anxiety, without talking about the other, language. Or at any rate a poet can't.

I began thinking about anxiety and faith seriously about fifteen years ago. Anxiety was something on which I was a bit of an expert by that point, though I would say it was more the existential ur-anxiety rather than the frittering, dithering, distracted anxiety that defines the lives of so many modern people now. Here is a poem I wrote about twenty years ago, in my second book: **screen**

Old Song, Long Night

If in some night of which I'm now a part
You wake in fear of nothing you can name
And, as you ease from loved ones, feel your heart
Quickening through your body with the same

Obscure imperative that I once knew,
Reading perhaps the very things I read
In search of something that will comfort you,
Some evidence that once the quickened dead

Endured a darkness that seemed all their own
And steeled themselves to name and feel each fear,
Then with each moment you are more alone,
More anxious, more afraid there's nothing here

But rage to sing some peace they'd never be,
Which dawns upon you as it dawned on me.

Which dawns upon you as it dawned on me. There is no hope for an end to this kind of anxiety, except for the moment in which such hope is rendered and rescued; that is, within the moment of perception or the moment of the poem itself. That dawn in the

poem is literal and brings the realization that there is no lasting peace; and it is metaphorical—in English, an idea or truth can “dawn” on you and may in fact be a very real “form of peace.” A very particular and limited kind of peace, to be sure. If there is any faith in this poem, it is only faith in what a poem can do.

About fifteen years ago things changed for me. I have written about this in *My Bright Abyss*. After arranging my entire adult life in the service of poetry, I found that I could no longer write it, and I endured three solid years of silence. It was during this time that I fell in love with the woman who is now my wife (who is here with me in the Netherlands, as it happens, back at our hotel with our now nine-year-old twin girls), and not long after that I was diagnosed with a blood cancer that seemed likely to end my life just as it seemed to be beginning. And it was right at the end of these three years, the final event that ended the silence, that I did the most radical act of all: I walked into a church.

The notion of faith was new to me, unless you count all those years of a kind of ravaging artistic discipline faith—sometimes I do, sometimes not. Perhaps sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't. In any event, it was the specific turn to God—the turn to a specific God, Jesus Christ—that made me begin to think of faith and anxiety together, the sympathetic relation between them, or the stark opposition between them. That part—whether they are sympathetically related or starkly opposed—took me quite a while to figure out.

The precipitating event was a dinner party I went to one night in Chicago, which eventually led me to write an essay called “Hive of Nerves.” Here is the first paragraph of that essay. **screen**

At a dinner with friends the talk turns, as it often does these days, to the problem of anxiety: how it is consuming everyone; how the very technologies that we have developed to save time and thereby lessen anxiety have only degraded the quality of the former and exacerbated the latter; how we all need to “give ourselves a break” before we implode. Everyone has some means of relief—tennis, yoga, a massage every Thursday—but the very way in which those activities are framed as apart from regular life suggests the extent to which that relief is temporary (if even that: a couple of us admit that our “recreational” activities partake of the same simmering, near-obsessive panic as the rest of our lives). There is something circular and static to our conversation, which doesn’t end so much as frazzle indeterminately out, and though there is always some comfort in comparing maladies, I am left with the uneasy feeling that my own private anxieties have actually increased by becoming momentarily collective—or no, not that, increased by *not* becoming collective, increased by the reinforcement of my loneliness within a collective context, like that penetrating but enervating stab of self one feels sometimes in an anonymous crowd. It is a full day later before it occurs to me that not once, not in any form, not even with the ghost of a suggestion, did any of us mention God.

But, as I ask later in the essay, how does one remember or reach for God, much less realize God’s presence in the midst of one’s life, if one is constantly being overwhelmed by that life? It’s one thing to encourage contemplation or prayer or quiet spaces in which God, or at least a galvanizing consciousness of His absence, can enter the

mind and heart. But the reality of contemporary life, which often seems like a kind of collective ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), is that this consciousness requires a great deal of resistance, and how does one relax and resist at the same time?

I'm usually suspicious of claims that privilege one generation's troubles over another's. Here's the English poet William Wordsworth in the famous "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads": **screen**

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves.

That was written over 200 years ago and it seems to me a more articulate expression of something you can now read in some national magazine every week. So there is something about "modern" anxiety that is not modern—a tension between time and eternity that people have probably always struggled with.

And yet, there is a difference. Wordsworth had no internet connection there in the Lake District of England. He had an inheritance. He didn't cook. He had nothing to do with childcare, and he could count on having his days free for study and long walks and his nights free for reading and conversation. When he describes the "savage torpor" of

his times he doesn't mean simply to exempt himself from this tendency, he means to offer up his life and work as antidotes. "The egotistical sublime" is John Keats's great phrase for Wordsworth, a perfectly balanced encomium and indictment. (That is, he praises and blames at the same time.)

But what about those of us here, who I suspect are much like those people I describe at the dinner party, at least in terms of feeling overwhelmed by our lives. **screen**

We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done. This 'time frame' deserves, perhaps more than any other facet of modernity, Max Weber's famous description of a 'stalhartes Gehause' (iron cage).

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

That poem of mine, "Old Song, Long Night," is a cry from within an iron cage—or maybe it's more like how Kafka described himself: it's a cage in search of a bird. "To sing some peace you'd *never* be." After that dinner party I began to think there had to be some way of singing some peace that I might be—and might be not simply in the moment of making art, when the self dissolves into what I can only call the soul, but might be in my other moments too, my moments of anxiety and feeling overwhelmed by my life, or those moments when it seems like I have no soul at all, much less some will o' the wisp called "faith."

Abraham Joshua Heschel once defined faith as primarily faithfulness to the times when we had faith. It's a tenuous tenacious discipline of memory and hope. I find this very helpful but also insufficient. There's got to be some way of bringing those moments

of inspiration—those spots of time—into the present, some way of integrating those moments when we attain “the calm existence that is ours when we are worthy of ourselves,” to paraphrase Wordsworth, and all of that other secular time when we are *not* worthy of ourselves. (I’m using examples of poetry because that’s what I know best, but I hope it’s evident that everything I am saying applies to inspiration that may have nothing whatsoever to do with art of any sort. It might be prayer, it might be moments of time with our loved ones when we “see into the life of things” (Wordsworth again). It might be—I hope it is—a moment this very afternoon when you walk out of here and see some tiny thing in your life shine with the life that it actually always has.)

Sara Grant was an English nun who lived from 1922 until 2002. When she was eighteen or nineteen years old she was sent off to India, where she ended up spending most of the rest of her life. She turned herself into a formidable Sanskrit scholar and became obsessed with reconciling her strong Christian faith with her developing respect for the truths of Hinduism. She wrote a very short book called *Toward an Alternative Theology: Notes of a non-Dualist Christian*, in which she presents what she has learned through the lens of her own life. Here is a passage that became important to me when I was meditating on anxiety. She quotes in here from the Hindu sacred text the *Kena Upanishad*: **screen**

“Brahman is not ‘that which one knows,’ but that by which one knows, as though a crystal bowl were aware of the sun shining through it. ‘when he is known through all cognitions, he is rightly known.’

(Brahman is the supreme being, or the ultimate reality underlying all phenomena.) This seems to me a step further than Heschel’s formulation of faith; it doesn’t necessarily

require that one be conscious about what lies beyond one's immediate perceptions. You could quote Christ here too: **screen** "To believe in me is not to believe in me but in him who sent me; to see me is to see him who sent me."

This seems very helpful to me, especially the first passage: when God is known through all cognitions, he is rightly known: *all* cognitions, even the ones that seem to crowd out or preclude God. Our anxieties, for instance. The Biblical analogue is slightly more problematic for me, at least initially. What does it mean to "believe" in Jesus?

Just recently I was reading a book by the American theologian Marcus Borg called *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. The book is excellent in many ways but nevertheless contained what seemed to me an appalling understanding of the relation of anxiety to faith. Borg points out that belief in Christianity might in fact make you *more* anxious if you feel that there is some law to which you have to conform or if you have a constant sense of the oppressive sinfulness of your own soul. That isn't the appalling part. It seems obviously true. But then Borg goes on to say that true Christian faith ought to *free* you from anxiety, and in fact anxiety is a clear indication that you do not have true faith. This irritated me, and when I brought the passage into my class of young divinity students, the passage positively infuriated them, because they are trying to live faithful lives in the midst of what seems to them an almost overwhelming anxiety.

It might be helpful to look at a couple of poems here. The first one is by Craig Arnold and is called "Meditation of a Grapefruit." Set up poem, tell story of Craig.

handout or screen

To wake when all is possible
before the agitations of the day

have gripped you
 To come to the kitchen
and peel a little basketball
for breakfast
 To tear the husk
like cotton padding a cloud of oil
misting out of its pinprick pores
clean and sharp as pepper
 To ease
each pale pink section out of its case
so carefully without breaking
a single pearly cell
 To slide each piece
into a cold blue china bowl
the juice pooling until the whole
fruit is divided from its skin
and only then to eat
 so sweet
 a discipline
precisely pointless a devout
involvement of the hands and senses
a pause a little emptiness

each year harder to live within
each year harder to live without

Each *year* harder to live within. Each *year* harder to live without. Notice how that day at the beginning has become a year, how the instant has become integral to fully existing during the rest of one's life. Notice too that the poem describes a discipline that is *precisely pointless*. There is a passive quality to the experience; you can prepare for it, but you can't aim at it. The great thing about poetry is not that it tells you what to feel. The great thing is that it gives you a form for feelings that were inchoate or formless, and inchoate feelings, even pleasurable ones, can destroy you. (Zadie Smith anecdote)

And yet Craig's poem does point to a hard truth: it becomes harder to hold on to these moments of soul in our lives, not easier. What becomes easier, alas, is to feel—or

usually to not quite feel but only dumbly suffer—the cold fear within the frenzy, the annihilating silence inside of all of that furious sound:

Set up Maria Hummel poem: **screen**

Station

Days you are sick, we get dressed slow,
find our hats, and ride the train.
We pass a junkyard and the bay,
then a dark tunnel, then a dark tunnel.

You lose your hat. I find it. The train
sighs open at Burlingame,
past dark tons of scrap and water.
I carry you down the black steps.

Burlingame is the size of joy:
a race past bakeries, gold rings
in open black cases. I don't care
who sees my crooked smile

or what erases it, past the bakery,
when you tire. We ride the blades again
beside the crooked bay. You smile.
I hold you like a hole holds light.

We wear our hats and ride the knives.
They cannot fix you. They try and try.
Tunne! Into the dark open we go.
Days you are sick, we get dressed slow.

Explain poem. Relation of suffering and joy.

But it need not be a specific suffering that confronts you. It might be one that you hardly allow yourself to recognize, except in the sharp moments when you do: **screen**

Like water trickling from the highest ice
Its bracing ache, its brain-shard sweetness,
Its nowhere air of utter now,

So my sigh has lost its source,
And I live by meanings I cannot comprehend,
For every instant I must taste the instant that I end.

That's the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. Tell little bit of his story. That poem I just read expresses one side of his experience of existential displacement, here felt as pure anxiety. Here is another side of what I think is the same experience, here felt as salvation:

I love the calm and custom of quick fingers weaving,
The shuttle's buzz and hum, the spindle's bees.
And look—arriving or leaving, spun from down,
Some barefoot Delia barely touching the ground . . .
What rot has reached the very root of us
That we should have no language for our praise?
What is, was; what was, will be again; and our whole lives'
Sweetness lies in these meetings that we recognize.

—Osip Mandelstam, *from* "Tristia"

These meetings that we recognize: of them faith is made and sustained. They are not so much remembered as resurrected in us, little stitches of ordinary time that suddenly . . . aren't. As Simone Weil says: **screen** "Time's violence rends the soul. Through the rent eternity enters."

One of the sentences from *My Bright Abyss* that gets challenged or approved or in some way quoted back to me most often is this one **screen**: "Sometimes God calls a person to unbelief in order that faith might take new forms." I'm glad this is the case, because this is one sentence that I can definitely stand by. And Osip Mandelstam was one person who most definitely led me to that thought. Though I think you'd have to

pervert the notion of sacred experience in order to call his late testaments “unbelief”:

screen

And I was alive in the blizzard of the blossoming pear,
Myself I stood in the storm of the bird-cherry tree.
It was all leaflife and starshower, unerring, self-shattering power,
And it was all aimed at me.

What is this dire delight flowering fleeing always earth?
What is being? What is truth?

Blossoms rupture and rapture the air,
All hover and hammer,
Time intensified and time intolerable, sweetness raveling rot.
It is now. It is not.

Imagine that being your final statement. I sometimes think that every single one of us is in the midst of making an utterance that will be our lives. Not an utterance that people can hear, perhaps, or that we will ever be able to see, but one which nevertheless will find its fruition in other lives. Few of us will actually manage what Mandelstam did, or the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, whose last act before slipping into unconsciousness six years ago was to text his wife: *noli timere*: Be not afraid. Which many of you will recognize as Jesus’s words in the book of Matthew. This sent a chill down my spine when I heard it because just a few months before Heaney’s death I had dinner with him after he had read in Chicago. (Tell story of Heaney. Few words about the new book.)

Let me end with a couple of more quotes from that Hive of Nerves essay and a poem of my own. **screen**

At first, attending to the anxiety of existence can seem like a zero-sum game. Any attention turned toward spiritual truth is attention turned away from all we have come to think of as “life.” Thus we parcel out our moments of devotion—a church service here and there, a walk in the woods, a couple of hours of meditation a week—all the while maintaining the frenzy of our usual existence outside of those moments. This is inevitable, for the initial demands of a any coherent spiritual life are intense, but it is not sustainable, for the soul is not piecemeal. We are left with this paradox: only by hearing the farthest call of consciousness can we hear the call of ordinary life, but only by claiming the most mundane and jangling details of our lives can that rare and ulterior music of the soul merge with what Seamus Heaney calls “the music of what happens.”

And now this:

The first step in the life of the spirit is learning to let yourself experience those moments when life and time seem at once suspended and concentrated, that paradox of attentive oblivion out of which any sustaining faith grows. These moments may not be—and at first almost certainly will not be—“meditative.” They are more likely to break into your awareness, or into what you thought was awareness (“inbreaking” is the theological term for Christ’s appearance in the world and in our lives—there is no coaxing it, no way to earn it, no way to prepare except to hone your capacity to respond, which is, finally, your capacity to experience life, and death). This is why we cannot separate one part of our existence, or one aspect of our awareness, from another, for there is a seed of peace in the most savage clamor. There is a kind of seeing that, fusing attention and submission, becomes a kind of being, wherein you may burrow into the very chaos that buries you, and even the most binding ties can become a means of release.

Read "Commute." Set up carefully.

I.

O the screech and heat and hate
we have for each day's commute,

the long wait at the last stop
before we go screaming

underground, while the pigeons
court and shit and rut

insolently on the tracks
because this train is always late,

always aimed at only us,
who when it comes with its

blunt snout, its thousand mouths,
cram and curse and contort

into one creature, all claws and eyes,
tunneling, tunneling, tunneling

toward money.

2.

Sometimes a beauty
cools through the doors at Grand,

glides all the untouchable
angles and planes

of herself
to stand among us

like a little skyscraper,
so sheer, so spare,

gazes going all over her
in a craving wincing way

like sun on glass.

3.

There is a dreamer
all good conductors

know to look for
when the last stop is made

and the train is ticking cool,
some lover, loner, or fool

who has lived so hard
he jerks awake

in the graveyard,
where he sees

coming down the aisle
a beam of light

whose end he is,
and what he thinks are chains

becoming keys.

I don't think anxiety is a failure of faith. I think it is a yearning for it. And not merely a yearning for it but the very material out of which any peace might come. I think of Jules Renard's famous statement that "There is another world, but it is in this one." An analogue is that there is peace, but it is within your life. The very thing that binds you may be the very thing that releases you. Mandelstam's fear of death becomes a cry of absolute and enduring consciousness. Maria Hummel's suffering doesn't exactly "become" joy but coalesces to some honest amalgam of the two feelings. In my own poem, I discover—or my inner dreamer or drunk or whatever discovers—that the very things that seem to bind him become the very things by which he is released: the chains become keys. How do you make that happen outside of a poem, where our moments of peace are "each year harder to live within, each year harder to live without," as Craig Arnold says about his moment of eating a grapefruit. I expect the answer is different for each of us, but in my own case I have found that an honest acknowledgment of the problem, together with examples of art that so clearly articulates some of the emotional and intellectual tensions I have been describing, have been both great solace—because they ease the pain—and provocation—because they propel me back into my life better equipped to actually experience it.