Anxiety’s Gift
By DANIEL HARRIS-McCoy

In the classroom, I base class sessions on four or five big questions, to which I often do not have the answers. The students and I then work through those questions together, ideally making each class period a time of discovery for all of us and putting us on an equal footing as fellows.

I’m not the only one who’s anxious. Many of my students, who grew up during the recent recession, also contend with anxiety or depression, or both. Some of their suffering no doubt is a result of normal growing pains. But much of it seems to reflect feelings of inadequacy and unrealistic expectations of themselves, as well as the unreasonable fear that one false step will have a catastrophic impact on their lives. These feelings are grounded in current events. The paucity of available jobs after graduation and the talent of their peers, whom students see as future competitors, surely contribute to their fears. An under-valuation of the importance of having a rich inner life—a consequence of students’ understandable concern about material things like jobs and money—is another contributor.

That’s why I believe that students should have more opportunities to think about the contours of the human experience and to be introspective in their classes. The introspection that history, the social sciences, and the humanities offer could be a corrective to the current and alarming over-emphasis on preprofessional studies.

In my course on Greco-Roman mythology, I begin the unit on psychoanalytic readings of myth by asking students to consider the power of the unconscious. I do this by asking them if they have any irrational fears or compulsions. Usually they cite predictable phobias like snakes or clowns. But compulsions are never mentioned, because I am sure the students who have them don’t want to come across as creepy or crazy.

However, on one remarkable occasion, a student described a compulsion that had paralyzed her throughout her life: She could not climb a staircase with an odd number of steps without performing elaborate ritualistic workarounds. Her brave confession opened the floodgates. One student after another shared similar experiences. These were students at one of the country’s most elite universities—Brown, where I was teaching as an adjunct—who had succeeded in maintaining an appearance of academic and social “perfection” for years. The relief they felt from sharing their vulnerabilities and seeing vulnerability in their peers was palpable. The resulting esprit de corps lasted the entire semester.

What was the “learning outcome” of this activity? It contributed to our understanding of the psychoanalytic dimensions of Greco-Roman myth, to be sure, but the most important result was more personal. What the students gained was compassion: the ability to see themselves and their peers as having the shared experience of being fully human, warts and all, and to appreciate themselves and one another for it.

It may be ironic that anxiety can help us cultivate compassion, which is one of the most valuable and extraordinary of our human qualities, but I have seen it happen both in myself and in my students. I encourage all anxious people—indeed, all people who suffer—to use their pain as an invitation to greater introspection and self-awareness. The development of those capacities is one of the greatest gifts of academic life.

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