

Anxiety's Gift

By DANIEL HARRIS-McCOY

EARLY in my undergraduate career, I developed an odd compulsion. When I typed something, whether an essay or an email, the final word of each line had to end precisely at the edge of the margin. Seeing the final word spill over to the next line, leaving empty space before the margin, made me feel queasy and anxious. Ragged-edged documents became my nemesis.

This tormented me for years. I would spend far, far too long writing papers, agonizing over each line, endlessly putting in, taking out, or changing words to get them to line up just right. Justifying the lines did not solve the problem, as I always perceived too much flabby space between the words.

My compulsion was, above all, a waste of time. As a humanities major, I wrote a lot of essays, so I had little time left for anything else. Clean line endings became more important to me than relaxing, socializing, sometimes even eating or sleeping.

Frustratingly, only after finishing my doctoral dissertation did I develop a workaround: writing each document in four-point font at 300-percent magnification. In fact, I'm using that technique now as I type. This allows me to compose almost half a paragraph per line. It's easy to write nice, complete lines when the letters are so tiny.

My writing compulsion is an expression of the more run-of-the-mill anxiety that I have dealt with ever since I can remember, and whose origins are not clear. In my case, I think my anxiety is genetic, but it has been exacerbated by my entering a competitive field of high achievers. Academe, where every sentence, footnote, period, and comma must be perfectly crafted—or so it often feels—can be unkind to the anxious, the very type of person who often seeks it out.

I loved (and still love) this profession enough to develop ways of dealing with and even profiting from my anxiety. When I taught my first class as a graduate student, I was so scared and overprepared that, when things veered from the script in my head, I was stymied and unable to speak. I started sweating so profusely that my shirt became soaked. Eventually, half the students dropped the class.

I knew that I would either have to improve my teaching or else drop out of grad school, so I learned to



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turn my anxiety into a positive trait by developing an energetic teaching style, which my students often praise in their course reviews.

Well into my career, I finally entered therapy. I happened to be finishing my first book at the time, so my therapist and I inevitably talked about my compulsion to write dense, even-edged documents.

I learned to see my compulsion through metaphors. It was an expression of a mind so attracted to what it believed was tight, clean, and orderly that its thinking became inflexible—the negative aspect of tightness. And its sense of quality was dominated by form—the fetishization of cleanliness and order—instead of content.

Through therapy, I learned to counterbalance those negative metaphors with more positive ones. Spaciousness, flexibility, and, my favorite, juiciness are qualities that I have tried to incorporate into my life and my teaching.

Juiciness—a term offered by my therapist—is the opposite of all that is dry, controlled, cerebral, austere, and needlessly serious. In teaching, for example, it is easy to overvalue standards, order, authority, and control even when one has the best of intentions. This is happening on a national level with the obsession over assessment, which reflects our society's desire for control in the face of its collective anxiety about the purpose, quality, and cost of higher education.

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 fellow learners.

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 undervaluation 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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