

THE WISDOM OF ANXIETY

How Worry & Intrusive
Thoughts Are Gifts
to Help You Heal

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INTRODUCTION

ANXIETY IS A DOORWAY

Carl Jung said that if you find the psychic wound in an individual or a people, there you also find their path to consciousness. For it is in the healing of our psychic wounds that we come to know ourselves. . . . In the evolution of consciousness, our greatest problem is always our richest opportunity.

ROBERT JOHNSON

We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love

Anxiety is the wound of our times. According to the World Health Organization, 260 million people are diagnosed with anxiety worldwide—and millions more are without a diagnosis. These numbers clearly indicate that we are living in an age of anxiety. This profound psychic wound crosses all boundaries by which we typically classify ourselves, for anxiety, like loss, is one of the great equalizers: it doesn't matter how old you are, where you live, what you look like, how much money you make, your sexual orientation, or your gender—eventually everyone will meet anxiety in the dark of night.

While the nature of the wound is clear, what is less clear from a mainstream perspective is how to address it. Guided by a Western mindset that seeks to erase pain in all forms (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual), most people see anxiety and its cohort of symptoms as something to hide, deny, distract from, or eradicate. What we don't realize is that when we regard anxiety only as a problem and seek to eliminate the symptoms, it is pushed underground, where it's

forced to rise back up with greater intensity, and we also miss the rich opportunity to evolve both individual and cultural consciousness that anxiety invites.

For anxiety is both the wound and the messenger, and at the core of the message is an invitation to wake up. In order to decipher the specifics of its messages, we have to shift from a mindset of shame, which sees anxiety as evidence of brokenness, to a mindset of curiosity, which recognizes that anxiety is evidence of our sensitive heart, our imaginative mind, and our soul's desire to grow toward wholeness. Anxiety, when approached from the mindset of learning, directs you to something deep inside that needs to be seen, a call from soul to pay attention, an invitation from the wellsprings of being to turn inward and heal at the next layer of growth.

One element that reduces the shame around anxiety is knowing that you're not alone; normalization causes shame to shrink. From the cross section of my worldwide audience, I hear the same symptoms and thoughts: "What if I married the wrong person?" "What if I have a terminal illness?" "What if I run out of money?" "What if something horrible happens to someone I love?" "What if I hurt my baby?" These are all clues that anxiety is the wound of our times and that we're in the territory of the collective unconscious. Carl Jung coined the term "collective unconscious" to describe the part of the mind that is common to all humans; and these thoughts, emerging from a shared psyche, point to the archetypal themes and stories where anxiety constellates: relationships, health, money, parenthood, the need for safety and security. Over the years, clients have shared these thoughts in hushed tones, but because I write about them weekly on my blog, they know that they're not alone. One of the blessings of the internet is that the contents of the collective unconscious, formerly only accessible via dreams and myths, are now more widely accessible. You are far from alone with your anxiety, no matter how it manifests.

Anxiety's emissaries arrive in many forms: worry, intrusive thoughts, obsessions, compulsions, insomnia, somatic symptoms. If we greet these emissaries with shame and try to sequester them into the far down, hidden recesses of psyche, they will gather in numbers and

strength until we are forced to listen. As they scream for attention, the culturally induced, shaming voices take over and say, “You’re broken. You’re fundamentally wrong. These thoughts and symptoms are evidence that there’s something deeply, pathologically wrong with you. Don’t talk about it. Don’t admit it. Try to get rid of it as quickly and cleanly as possible.”

Seeing anxiety and intrusive thoughts as wise manifestations of the unconscious is a vastly different view—and a much more hopeful and life-enhancing view—of anxiety than the one our culture holds. For what I’ve witnessed over the last twenty years of working closely in the underworld of psyche is that when we turn toward our symptoms instead of medicalizing and pathologizing them, we begin to gather our gold. Anxiety is a doorway into a self that longs for wholeness. Our symptoms, when honored, lead the way. When you meet your darkest, most uncomfortable places with a mindset of curiosity and compassion, you transform, and your life expands in untold ways. I’ve seen it countless times with my clients, my course members, my friends, my children, and in my own life. The same can be true for you.

Brazil: My Initiation into Anxiety

There were several pivotal events in my life that invited me to realign with my soul, times when my inner self grabbed me by the ankles and dragged me into the underworld. The first, and most powerful, was a panic attack that broke me open when I was twenty-one, a few months before I graduated from college. It was that panic attack and the subsequent years of drowning in daily anxiety that shattered my illusion of my “perfect life.” It destroyed my glass castle of superiority, the belief that I was beyond suffering, created and confirmed by years of immersion in an education system that rewarded me for being school-smart. It destroyed my conviction that I had the right answers, or any answers. In short, it brought me to my knees in all ways—from heart palpitations to a phobia of driving that ensued after that first panic attack to night terrors and nightmares that punctuated my sleep for years. And yet, from the ashes, the pain, and the total destruction

of life as I had known it, a new life—and a life's work—was born. This is how our unconscious, working through anxiety and its sisterhood of symptoms, invites us toward wholeness: we're broken open, brought to our knees, dragged into the underworld *not* to be tortured or because there's something wrong or disordered with us, but because there's something right and beautiful inside that is longing to be seen and known.

The seeds of my panic attack had been planted a year before and were intimately connected to a trip to Brazil my junior year of college. I never planned to go to Brazil. Having spoken Spanish throughout high school and into college, I had always planned to travel to Spain. But then the Brazil bug bit me: I had taken a Brazilian dance class the summer after my first year of college, and I was hooked by the dance and the culture. I danced all summer. I danced through the next year and immersed myself in Brazilian music. Quite impulsively, I changed my plans and set into motion an experience that would alter the course of my life.

In January 1990, instead of getting on a plane to Spain, I headed for Salvador, Brazil, where I was immediately pummeled when the fantasy I had built up in my mind clashed hard with the reality I encountered. In a single moment, I was yanked from my safe, clean, upper-middle-class life and hammered down into the middle of a life I had never known on any level. I lived in *favelas* where cockroaches the size of snails lined the floors and ceilings in such numbers that white paint seemed black; I witnessed a man get shot during Carnival; I daily walked past pools of fresh blood on the streets; I nearly drowned in a sudden riptide; I had trouble finding anything healthier than Guaraná to drink (basically sugar water). For months, I ate what I thought were crushed peanut cakes from vendors on the side of the road only to learn at the end of the trip that they were actually crushed shrimp cakes that had been sitting in the hot sun all day. All my systems, from the physical to the spiritual, were on high-alert overload.

Those four months terrified me, yet they were also what initiated me into an essential breakdown that would lead to following the bread crumbs of anxiety and panic into my true self. Some people are initiated through ancient rites in the middle of a forest. Some people are

initiated through a crisis of health, relationship, or faith. I was initiated in Brazil. And when I look back now, I can clearly see that I was pulled to Brazil by invisible forces: the dance, the music—something unnamable led me there. It was out of character for me to be so impulsive, but nothing was going to stop me; I had to go. I had to be broken open. The story of my life as I had known it—that I was somehow above suffering—had to shatter so that the underworld of hidden pain that lived inside the polished persona could emerge and be healed.

We're all offered experiences that break us open to our core. One of the fatal flaws of our culture is that we take everything at face value and fail to see the metaphor, which, itself, contains the keys to healing. When a client comes to me convinced that he has cancer, regardless of the fact that he received a clean bill of health the week before, it takes time to quiet the ego's convincing story enough to explore the deeper underpinnings that are longing to be known. If we remain attached to addressing the anxiety at the level of the story—which usually looks like seeking endless reassurance—we'll remain stuck in anxiety. But if we can crack open the story and see that the fear of cancer, for example, is pointing to a need to develop tolerance for uncertainty and explore the metaphor that something is "eating away" at one's heart or soul, shifts begin to occur.

In my story, Brazil wasn't the problem. In fact, it took me years to understand that Brazil was the screen onto which my own unworked shadow—the pain, fear, and trauma that had to be shoved down in my first twenty years in order to keep going—was projected. Because Brazil carried my shadow, I couldn't see its beauty; I only saw the terror and despair that lived inside of me reflected in my surroundings. And it took having a panic attack while driving down the 405 freeway in Los Angeles for the shadow to rise to the surface where I could finally see it, work with it, and heal.

The ensuing years, which were the decade of my twenties, were both painful and transformative. In my early twenties, I entered a graduate program in depth psychology, which helped me begin to make sense of my anxiety through the lens of Jungian theory, which understands that symptoms are messengers from the unconscious, inviting us to grow

toward wholeness. In my midtwenties, after working with a series of mediocre therapists, I landed on the couch of a brilliant man who guided me through the terrain of anxiety and helped me navigate my inner landscape. I read voraciously about transitions and wrote my first book, *The Conscious Bride*, which explores the underbelly of the wedding rite of passage. I began to work with clients struggling through their own transitions, especially around relationships, and helped them understand the invitations and metaphors embedded in their presenting stories.

None of this would have happened without Brazil. For years I regretted that experience, until eventually I realized that Brazil was my soul's way of forcing me to grow. It wasn't an accident; and your life isn't an accident either—not your anxiety, your wounds, your failures, or your traumas. In fact, the great sages teach that the seed for healing lives at the center of each trauma, meaning that your greatest challenge will also be your greatest strength. When I look back on Brazil, I know that it was through that experience that my inner world demanded to be known. Anxiety and panic were the doorways that led me to peel away the layers of pain and adapted persona that needed to be shed so that I could live closer to my true self. Anxiety is your doorway, too.

A Road Map Through Anxiety

This book will guide you step-by-step through the necessary mindsets and tools that will help you transform your relationship to anxiety so that you can release yourself from its grip and learn to decode its messages.

In part 1, I will clearly define anxiety and its symptoms as well as articulate the origins and causes of anxiety. I discuss the three pillars that allow the sensitive soul—and what I've come to see over the years of working with thousands of people is that we are all, to varying degrees, sensitive souls—to navigate successfully through life: understanding who you are and how you're wired, understanding how transitions are crucial breaking and renewal points that can either calcify or heal layers of anxiety, and offering the foundational keys of curiosity, compassion, stillness, and personal responsibility, which

allow you to transform anxiety from a burden to a gift. I will also discuss the most challenging roadblock that appears anytime we set out in the direction of healing: resistance.

In part 2, I will guide you through the four realms of self—body, thoughts, emotions, and soul—so that you can learn to decipher the messages embedded in each realm. My work is holistically based, which means that, while most approaches address anxiety from a physical (somatic healing), emotional/psychological (some talk therapy), or cognitive (behavioral therapy and most talk therapies) perspective, my work encompasses all three of these areas plus a fourth: our soul. As I view anxiety not as something to get rid of but as a call for healing, part 2 will help you understand that anxiety is a messenger that is pointing to unmet needs and unhealed places in all four realms.

In part 3, I will explore how anxiety shows up in your intimate relationships with friends, partners, and children. Because our culture sends the erroneous message that fear and love are mutually exclusive and doesn't understand the paradoxical nature of love in all forms, when anxiety appears in our relationships, it's easy to believe that there's something wrong. This section explodes that belief and replaces it with a model that supports healthy love and mindful parenting so that we don't allow shame and anxiety to tear at the fabric of our most sacred and meaningful relationships.

In each section, I'll share stories both from my clients' experiences and moments of my own life that highlight how to sink below the surface of anxiety and tap into the wellsprings of wisdom that it offers. These stories will teach in a spiral as opposed to a linear fashion, meaning I'll write about tending to grief in the chapter on transitions and reference back to transitions when talking about grief. Despite what the culture teaches, learning isn't linear, but follows the circular, spiral rhythm of the soul. This book, while organized into chapters, follows the soul rhythm as well.

Throughout the book, I'll be offering both on-the-spot practices and deep-dive practices for healing from anxiety. On-the-spot practices are actions you can take in the moment, anywhere, at any time: in a meeting, on the elevator, in the airplane, at a party, in bed at night. They

won't heal the anxiety from the root, but they'll help you move through a high-anxiety moment and will also help you take anxiety a few notches down in general so that you can engage in the deeper practices.

The deep-dive practices are those that will heal anxiety from the ground up and help you decipher its messages. These are practices that I'll be encouraging you to engage with every day, preferably when you first wake up in the morning (before you grab your phone) and at night before you go to sleep. As you read through the pages of this book, you will glean a lot of information about the roots of your anxiety, and this information will likely translate into personal insight. Write down these aha moments as they arise, either in the margins of this book or in a journal. Then use these insights as springboards from which to engage regularly with the deep-dive practices. Insight is essential, but it's action that metabolizes the insight into your body and heart and result in change. It's a simple formula: insight + action = change. If you want to break free from anxiety, practice is key.

While all the tools are designed to be practiced on your own, inner work is infinitely more effective when we're witnessed and guided by a skilled professional. As such, if you're not currently in therapy, I recommend finding a therapist who can work alongside you on this journey. Throughout history, humans have sought counsel from mentors and shamans, religious figures and teachers, and for many modern people, therapists fill those roles. *We are not meant to figure life out on our own.* Also, don't hesitate to share this book with your therapist. While they will have their own model and mindset from which they work, good therapists will always be open to learning new philosophies and tools that might help their clients, and possibly even themselves, grow and heal.

Key Terms on the Journey

In order to decipher anxiety's messages, it's helpful to understand the primary vessels through which anxiety communicates, so I'll define here the terms that you'll be encountering throughout this book.

Soul. Our guiding principle. Jungian theorists refer to the soul as the Self with a capital S, and it is another word for the unconscious. We connect most deeply with this aspect of ourselves through dreams and symptoms, and it's this inner guide that presents the symptoms that we'll be discussing throughout this book—anxiety, rumination, worry, intrusive thoughts, insomnia—as it attempts to bring us back into alignment with our core essence. Psyche, another term you'll find in this book, is another word for soul. In fact, in Greek mythology, Psyche is the goddess of the soul.

Spirit. The connecting energy or source that is both inside each of us and beyond us. We connect to spirit most often through creativity, imagination, nature, meditation, the arts, animals, and prayer. We feel spirit at the birth of a child, at weddings, while standing at the base of giant redwoods or on the shores of the ocean. Some people connect to spirit in a religious context, but many people connect to this animating principle in ways that have nothing to do with organized religion. Joseph Campbell describes it as “the generating energy of the life that is within you and all things.” In its simplest definition, spirit is interchangeable with love.

Ego. The ego, which simply means “I” in Latin, is the part of ourselves that is conscious and of which we are aware. As Robert Johnson writes in *Inner Work*,

When we say “I” we are referring to only that small sector of ourselves of which we are aware. We assume that “I” contains only *this* personality, *these* traits, *these* values and viewpoints that are up on the surface within the ego's range of vision, accessible to consciousness. This is my limited, highly inaccurate version of who “I” am.

The ego is our conscious self and is a necessary and healthy part of our psychological structure, but it also includes the fear-based parts of our personality. The ego includes our conscious aspects—both the ability to think, feel, reflect, plan, and execute, and the part of us that feels so comfortable with what we know (conscious awareness) that it resists the unknown realm of the unconscious. When we believe that we are *only* our conscious/ego selves, we lose touch with the guiding principle of our lives, which is our soul/unconscious.

Resistance. Ego has many subsets, including resistance, which is the part of us that is scared to grow because it fears change. Resistance clings to the status quo and often shows up as laziness, inertia, numbness, and fear. In order to gather the gifts of anxiety and grow to our next level of consciousness, we have to work actively with resistance so that it doesn't run the show. The paradox of the ego is that it both resists growth and longs to be in relationship to the soul. Part of the tension of being human is being in relationship with this paradox.

Individuation. Robert Johnson explains in *Inner Work* that “*individuation* is the term Jung used to refer to the lifelong process of becoming the complete human beings we were born to be. Individuation is our waking up to our total selves.” The process of individuating includes shedding aspects of the conditioned personalities that we absorbed through the process of growing up but that are not in alignment with our true selves.

For example, if a child grows up to become a doctor to please her parents, but deep inside her passion lies in animal communication, when she's broken open through anxiety or during a transition, she will have been invited to shed at least one layer of the need to please her parents, which will allow her to come closer to her true self. Every time we walk through a transition consciously, as we'll see later in the book, we have an opportunity to shed a layer of our conditioned

mindsets, habits, beliefs, and intergenerational patterns that no longer serve us. Anxiety and its attending feelings that arise during transitions and at other times in life are the arrows that point the way along the journey of individuating.

Anxiety is the bridge that connects ego to soul, conscious to unconscious, and when we learn how to harness the wisdom of anxiety, the richness and messages contained in the unconscious can inform and expand our conscious lives.

A Call to Grow

Anxiety asks you, dear reader, to embrace the gift of who you are. Maybe you've been told that you're too much—too sensitive, too dramatic, too emotional, too analytical—and this message was translated inside your young self to mean that you were wrong or broken in some way. But you must begin to know now, as hopefully you will as you read through this book, that there's absolutely nothing wrong with you. You're not broken. You're not too much. You're not wrong. In fact, it's the very qualities that you've been shamed for that you now need to wrap up like a hurt animal and hug close to your heart. For it's when you stop seeing your sensitivity as a burden and instead recognize it as the gift it is that you will begin to heal the hurt places inside you and bring your full presence into the world.

The self-protective habit you've learned is to ignore the anxiety at best and judge it at worst. Bereft of tools that teach you to move toward your discomfort and encouraged by a culture that is externally oriented—where your self-worth is correlated to external factors like appearance, career status, financial assets, and achievements—you've developed an ingrained habit to track outward toward anything that will distract from or numb the pain. You may reach for external addictions like a digital device, a shopping spree, a drug, or staying busy through Googling, Facebooking, working, advancing, climbing the ladder, or to internal distractions like worry and intrusive thoughts. You so desperately want to avoid the “fundamental groundlessness of

being,” as Pema Chödrön refers to a basic aspect of being human that feels out of control as it knows that our lives are informed by constant change and loss. The groundlessness is the sadness you feel around the passage of time, knowing that life is always in transition. The groundlessness is the fear of big feelings since nobody taught you how to tend to them with kindness. The groundlessness is the nameless fear, grief, and dread that often accompany anxiety. Conditioned by a culture that pounds you with the belief that the answers are “out there,” you naturally reach outward to stave off the discomfort of your inner world.

But when you find the courage to turn inward, to become curious about the labyrinths and caves that make up your inner world, everything changes. You discover that anxiety can inform your life, but it does not have to define it. You’re not destined for anxiety; you’re destined for equanimity. You’re not destined for limitation; you’re destined for greatness. You’re not destined to feel lost, empty, and alone; you’re destined to feel purposeful and connected. You’re not destined to define yourself by your challenges; you’re destined to grow through these challenges and become a more balanced version of yourself, where your weaknesses become your strengths, and the places where you’ve struggled most become your greatest gifts.

A library as big as the universe lives inside you, waiting for you to sit down in some dimly lit, quiet corner so that you can discover its contents. Are you ready to step inside, to unlearn much of what you’ve absorbed, and learn some basic principles of life and relationships that will fundamentally alter your understanding of yourself and the world? Are you ready to travel through the passageways of your four realms of self—body, mind, heart, and soul—to heed the messages that live inside each one? If so, take my hand, and let’s begin.