

ANXIETY IN THE GRASS
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Anxiety was his problem, or more accurately, his constant companion. It seemed never to leave his side. Others might be bipolar and broadcast their depression or mania to the world. His anxiety was an almost secret companion. Most others could not see any hint of it. But it was there and if he got close enough they felt it. It was like a cat's purr absent its endearing quality.

When had it started? Fittingly, at the time of puberty. A simultaneous change of schools and classes without a friend did not help. Suddenly, every test became a cause of great anxiety. The nervous feeling heightened from the moment the test was announced to the moment it was given if he knew the material or the moment it was over if he didn't. He knew when he did well or poorly – there was no illusion in him that way. If he did well he felt greatly relieved. If he did poorly it was as if every failing and shortcoming he knew about himself had been confirmed.

Nervousness beyond agony occurred when the teacher announced that everyone in the class had to give an oral presentation. You would think that he would prepare meticulously and rehearse his little 2-minute speech. You would think wrong. Instead, he just allowed the anxiety to crescendo throughout the week. His presentation was a fiasco.

He joined the track team. Before every meet he felt sick. Sometimes he threw up. The nervousness ended at the starting gun, but if he ran in two events it began anew as soon as he had recovered his breath. He noted that physical exhaustion trumped anxiety. It helped him keep in shape his entire life.

Asking girls out was another source of anxiety. This one was interminable because the fear, indeed the certainty of rejection kept him from asking but the anxiety remained because he kept mentally preparing to ask out the girls.

The car broke down the first day of a cross-country trip. The car was towed and repaired. For days afterward he was sure the car would break down again at the first moment he relaxed his guard. Suddenly he had a revelation. He realized his vigilance had no relation to or impact on the condition of the car. All the anxiety in his life was purposeless and fruitless. It didn't prepare him for anything and was

furthermore was counterproductive. But he could not internalize that precious insight.

He diagnosed anxiety as a result of a feeling of lack of control. An aide to President Woodrow Wilson once said that Wilson was so controlling he appeared to feel as if the grass would not grow if he did not oversee it.

School years passed. He got a job at a bank, eventually did get married, and even had children. Two decades into the job all seemed secure and the anxiety abated. Then the epoch of downsizing began. Joe, who had the cubicle on the left, was fired. Fred quit when he was demoted and transferred to Anchorage. One by one, they went. Then his job was threatened directly. The anxiety returned. Nights were almost sleepless. This went on for five years. He worried greatly about his heart.

One night after a heavy dinner he felt as if he had swallowed a boiling potato. He recognized he was having a heart attack. His wife called 911. They saved his life. Quadruple bypass.

The heart attack only increased his anxiety. Every moment he was certain another attack would creep up on him if he relaxed his guard. It became impossible to sleep. Eternal vigilance was required. He became somewhat like Woodrow Wilson. It was as if the grass could not grow without his constant attention,. He could not dare rely on his old revelation that anxiety was at best counterproductive.

More years went by. Still alive, the anxiety became more episodic. There were times he could forget it for hours at a stretch! No joke – that was a major accomplishment.

Throughout his lifetime of anxiety he wondered where it had come from. But he never got an answer. He just seemed to be the just about the only anxious person in the universe. Surely, from time to time he saw other anxious people practicing their art. They all gave undue importance to some trivial item or issue of the moment. They gave the impression that everything had earth shattering importance. It appeared so ridiculous to see it in others. His anxiety by contrast was real. That brought to his mind the old saying that Comedy is when you break your neck; Tragedy is when I stub my toe. But he could never internalize the knowledge of his self-absorption.

Where did it come from? Where did it come from? It couldn't be purely genetic. It couldn't!

Then one day in the park with his granddaughter he witnessed an unpleasant scene. A mother shook her 3-year old son violently for some unseen and unheard infraction and then growled to him, “Just wait until I get you home!”

That was it! That had been his childhood. One memory welled up – then another and another in quick succession. His early childhood had been filled with various ingenious or even pedestrian punishments. But all so often the punishment was preceded by a long waiting period of, “Wait until...” “Wait until I get you home!” “Wait until your father gets home!” He had suffered the sadism of suspense.

Why did the anxiety wait until puberty to appear? Before that it was there but was submerged below the surface. Then it metamorphosed as his body metamorphosed. All things had been taken care of in his child world. But from adolescence he was on his own. And what was the lesson of it all? – “Wait until the inevitable failure or disaster!”

The revelation was the birth of freedom. The anxiety would take time to dispel – how much he couldn’t tell. For this though, he could wait! Suddenly he had acquired some newfound patience. Finally, he could let the grass grow on its own.