

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

Discovering methods for deep calm

chad prevost



CALM

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FOREWORD

WE HELP PEOPLE TO BE THEMSELVES.

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? On the one hand, it's true. There is great simplicity and insight into finally realizing that all social reformation and revelation begins with the individual. The harder part is discovering authentic principles and living by them day by day, moment by moment.

One of the most fascinating things about this work is discovering for ourselves that there is no defining characteristic of those who have found themselves. What do we mean "found themselves"? We mean that you were born exactly who you needed to be. You possess gifts and a unique constellation of atoms and neurons all firing to make you already whole. You

will find by cutting through outward expectations and cultural mania that within you is already a calm and steady self. Finding yourself begins with finding calm.

Our modern lifestyle packs a punch when it comes to stress. We are bombarded with ideas that we can control the uncontrollable, bend reality to meet our expectations, and twist other people's wills to meet our needs. We have an arsenal of irrational thought patterns that don't jibe with our lived experience, and that dissonance we feel is anxiety showing up. As comedian William Saroyan once quipped, "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case."

Even in the best of times, our anxiety can dictate the terms of our reality. In times of intensity and heightened stress, our desire to stay calm, patient, and unruffled may seem impossible. Our brains are hard-wired to scan for impending threats in order to keep us safe, and the body automatically keeps score. We can't escape this. We can learn to work with what is naturally happening so that it doesn't pull us under into the deep black waters of anxiety and despair.

ONE

What do we talk about when we talk about calm?

Many mistake calm for passivity. Many others think it is merely about proper breathing diaphragmatically. It is not. Make no mistake, calm is active. Calm is action. Calm is disciplined. The good news is calm can be taught. Breathing techniques can aid calm, but in the final analysis, calm comes from your thoughts.

Calm is one of the most important building blocks of self-knowledge. While there is no one place to begin on the journey to self-knowledge and self-understanding, calm is fundamental.

Calm is related to the concept of *apatheia*. For the Stoics, this meant eradicating the tendency to react emotionally or egotistically to external events, the things that cannot be controlled. It was the optimum rational response to the world. Why? Because of the predictable chaos of the will of others and nature — forces outside ourselves.

Only your own will can be controlled. That does not imply that you lose feeling, or disengage from the world. Ryan Holiday

has recently popularized the term *apatheia* as noted from one early practitioner of the day, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Rome's greatest playwright, and perhaps also its greatest philosopher. He writes of this concept in *Stillness is the Key*:

"It's a powerful idea made all the more transcendent by the remarkable fact that nearly every other philosophy of the ancient world — no matter how different or distant — came to the exact same conclusion."

Whether you were a pupil of Confucius in 500 BCE, a student of the early Greek philosopher Democritus one hundred years later, or in Epicurus's garden a generation after that, "You would have heard equally emphatic calls for this imperturbability, unruffledness, and tranquility."

The term is most directly connected to the word *stillness* in English. It is the ability to be steady as the world storms around. *Stillness* is the process of achieving deep inner calm. All the great religions and philosophical schools have a term for finding it, and for what it permits. It permits us access into the Tao, the Logos. *Stillness*, solitude, and silence are all prac-

tices that lead to an emotional energy of calm.

Calm and Anger

Seneca called anger the most “savage of all the emotions,” and wrote *De Ira (On Anger)* on how you should *never* — under any circumstances — give in to your anger. It may be the most systematic argument against anger ever written. Need justified revenge? Fine. But pursue it for the right reasons, not in anger.

Anger creates haste. Anger blinds. Anger conquers the mind. Anger, according to Seneca’s eloquent treatise, is effectively the root of evil. You don’t want it in your house. The worst things we do to one another are committed in anger. If anyone would know, it was Seneca, who wrote *De Ira* having survived a first-hand seat in the court of Caligula. The atrocities committed by Caligula, followed shortly after by Nero, cannot be adequately summarized in a sentence; they were nothing less than grotesque and monstrous.

Yet, you might push back and say, “Seneca was an exemplar. He and other Stoics were uncommon humans with great teachers and early fortune. What about the great vast ocean of humanity?”

It’s true, and you could say that anger exists within us for a

reason. Doesn't anger fuel the athlete to dig deeper? The angry "chip on the shoulder" in any field, for any number of reasons, can drive you for years. Some say they can harness their anger into action, especially for things that are morally wrong. For his part, Seneca says to keep it strictly out in all responses.

In the social sciences over roughly the course of the past century, anger has been viewed as destructive when it is habitual and impulsive. However, anger has also been viewed as *instructive*. "Healthy anger" can be a justified and even necessary response, a sign that you have been wronged, or are experiencing disrespect — whether in fact or perception. Self-respecting people know when their boundaries are being violated.

Anger is also deeply ingrained in our emotions. I'm thinking about all those hundreds of road trips I've made on the U.S. interstates and the growing aggression I feel, especially as the roads congest and the trip's estimated duration lengthens. I think about waiting in long lines at Disney World, like an hour and a half for a three-minute Minions ride while everyone bakes in the heat and gets dehydrated because their \$12 Icees are giving them headaches. Or why have Shelley and I had our biggest fights almost every time we travel — the big wonderful event we've been planning for months?

Calm is about staying mindful and in control through a myriad of possible emotions or emotional responses. Anger is but one of them. Angry people are examples of those who are not in control of their minds. Their minds rule them and ultimately keep them in their more primal, animal nature.

In *The 48 Laws of Power*, Robert Greene sums up the anger response—and our response to an angry outburst—superbly:

“Our anger often stems from problems in our childhood, from the problems of our parents which stem from their own childhood, on and on. Our anger also has roots in the many interactions with others, the accumulated disappointments and heartaches that we have suffered. An individual will often appear as the instigator of our anger but it is much more complicated, goes far beyond what that individual did to us. If a person explodes with anger at you (and it seems out of proportion to what you did), you must remind yourself that it is much larger, goes way back in time, involves dozens of prior hurts, and is actually not worth the bother to understand. Instead of seeing it as a personal grudge, look at the emotional outburst as a disguised power move, an attempt to control or punish you cloaked in the form of hurt feelings and anger.”

Why? Because this at least lets you respond with clarity and the appropriate energy. Don't become ensnared in their emotions. Keeping your head while they lose theirs is its own power.

But what about when the anger isn't coming from someone else, but yourself? In psychology, anger is generally considered a primary emotion (along with fear, sadness, and joy). But is it realistic to keep anger "out of our house" altogether? What if we grew up in a family that thwarted our anger response? What if we grew up under conditions that expressed anger openly?

If you feel you have pent up anger within you, this may be a signal that you should confront the source. Repressed anger leads to depression. Frequently expressed anger is also a signal that you are at war with yourself.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, theologian and novelist Frederick Buechner describes anger like this:

"Of the Seven Deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are

giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

If anger is a part of your story, simply learning anger control techniques won't work all that well. What is most effective in working through past anger is to allow it to be confirmed, validated, and released in a safe, controlled environment. Trauma and recovery therapists say you should permit it to be expressed to those who originally sourced it — either by what they did or didn't do.

For many, that may be the only way to make peace. Anger will not let you keep it at a distance for long if the problem goes deep. It needs to be brought forth and given a voice. It should be honored for its felt legitimacy if you are to heal through it

and find calm.

Calm and fear

As a general rule, humans are terrible at dealing with uncertainty. Your anxiety wants you to solve problems as quickly as possible. When the world is burning, it's normal to run to the closest fire and stomp it out.

But of course, there's always another fire.

Anxiety creeps upon us. We might start feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, unable to focus. We might get irritated or annoyed at anyone getting too near us at the grocery store during a pandemic when people are supposed to be social distancing, and against our better nature we see everyone as a viral threat. We may not be able to fall asleep at night because our minds remain fully alert and full of things we need to do.

This leads us to focus on the physical symptoms and sensations of anxiety and to overlook the psychological ones. It can lead us to focus on techniques to reduce our anxiety like deep breathing or exercising or meditation or yoga. These practices are great for accessing temporary calm (and will be discussed later in this book), but they still do not get to the root cause of our fear and anxiety.

Cognitive science and rational-emotive therapy have shown us how powerful our beliefs can be. As young children, we have consistent thought patterns based on how we perceived our holding environment, and over time those thought patterns become internalized beliefs. We carry these beliefs into adulthood.

Cognitive flexibility is perhaps one of the greatest tools in the pursuit of accessing calm. There are two components to cognitive flexibility: change how you think about a problem, and let go of what isn't working.

The belief that we can change or control reality can keep us in an anxiety death grip. The root of our stress and anxiety emerges when expectations don't agree with reality. Our mind looks for ways to close the loop. It attempts to ruminate, catastrophize, and play out potential endings. Without the tools — and the courage — to confront the source of our fear, we will be hounded by anxiety.

Some fears don't have a fix. Some fears remind us of our impermanence and stoke existential angst that can feel overwhelming. We fear for our own safety and those of the people we love. Our desire for control doesn't jibe with the truth — we know we are not in control.

Rigid thinking is the opposite of cognitive flexibility. Marcus Aurelius lived through a plague, constant sieges, and betrayals during the last 14 years of his life. But as he wrote in his book *Meditations*, we can always return to that “inner citadel” of peace and imperturbability from which he could much more effectively fight all the challenges he had to face. Fixed mindsets and rigid thinking will keep you looping and looping on the merry-go-round. It may be safe, but the ride is predictable and boring.

We can't know the “work” Aurelius did to get there. Perhaps it was through writing the meditations themselves. After all, tradition tells us that he was writing the meditations as if to himself, not for posterity. We do know that getting to the root can help us to genuinely diminish the anxiety — and better

understand ourselves.

Rising above the personal and “normal” response

When my bike was stolen from my outdoor shed, I took it personally. Why me? Why my bike? Didn't the thief realize that to make the money required to buy a new bike would take savings and a lot of hard work, not to mention shopping? How many bike rides would I lose out on, and how would it affect my ability to take my kids on rides?

Why my neighborhood? Why my shed? And this is why we have to lock everything all the time because there are people who don't respect the property of others and believe it is their right as much as anyone's to what they don't have.

When bad things happen, it's easy to take it personally.

On the flip side, when good things happen, it's easy to take that personally too. The truth is, we are better off not taking either personally. That is if we want to practice calm. This goes back to the term *apatheia* discussed in the opening. Finding stillness involves a process that detaches from the ego's operating instructions as it responds to life vicissitudes.

By contrast, attachment in Buddhist and Hindi practice is seen as the inability to practice or embrace detachment and is seen as the main obstacle towards a serene and fulfilled life. Many spiritual traditions identify the lack of detachment with the continuous worries and restlessness produced by desire and personal ambitions.

In terms of seeking the sources of calm, that is as good a place as any. Don't take the daily humiliations personally. For that matter, don't take the rewards and recognitions either. The rise and fall of your position say nothing about you as a person. Treat both success and failure with indifference. Focus on doing and being your best. If the effort is enough let it be enough. Develop immunity to the seduction of external events. As the last great emperor and Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius who was in power from 161 to 180 AD said, "Receive without pride, let go without attachment."

Don't take life so personally. Take it seriously, but follow it with a dose of levity. Certainly it is virtuous to aspire "to receive without pride," but perhaps it is harder to receive critique especially when it is not what anyone sees or values. Maybe it's even harder when it comes to the smaller things, the things of less prestige and when they irritate us.

Accepting life's "daily humiliations" is what Richard Rohr

is talking about in *Falling Upward*, and David Brooks in *The Second Mountain*. It's all a part of growing up and accepting life fluidly as it comes.

Many begin climbing the "second mountain" of life only after life has had a chance to deliver them some failures and setbacks, which may or may not have come out of their own making. Often it comes about in what is roughly drawn up to be the second half of life. The life journey marches on, but now our kids are well on their way out of the house, or our career is revealing itself for what it is (or isn't). Only then do we retreat from the ego's outward-looking stance, and begin the great journey inward.

Although it's not likely, you can begin the journey earlier. Of course, it takes strength and courage to begin the journey at any time of life.

One of the popular methods for finding calm over the past several decades in Western culture has been a practice taken from Buddhism. It is a style of meditation in which we release thoughts through concentrated focus. The aim is to reveal the "monkey mind," the way our thoughts are restless and often aimless and transitory. With discipline and focus this approach begins to inform us about the trivialities of things in our mind that seem big at the moment. It can help us achieve serenity and reduce anxiety. It can give us perspective — a 35,000-

foot view — of our ego. Studies have shown that master meditators are less defensive than those who do not meditate, which is also an indication of fluidity and resilience, key tools for sustaining calm.

The emptying of the mind is not the only way to achieve calm. There are ways to analyze and interpret our actions and our thoughts in order to develop the “calm muscle.” Active reflection and critical feedback are critical approaches to understanding the chaos we experience in our modern life. Transitory or not, we would do well to accept that anxieties will always be with us. We should make a practice to bring them to consciousness, and actively reflect on where they are coming from, and what our enlightened response should be.

By reflecting and analyzing we can seek to understand. By understanding we can grow. We can seek a variety of sources,

and ultimately we can come to expect the unexpected, and laugh at ourselves when we inevitably fail.

What is going on in our brains when we feel irritated with others?

The smaller things, those attached with less prestige, are often the very sources of conflict that we are not prepared for. From a neuropsychological standpoint, it's generally accepted that when people reflexively react to perceived stress in a way that's out of proportion to any direct physical threat, the source is the brain's "primitive" subcortical and limbic region.

The more sophisticated prefrontal cortex isn't slowing the activating event (it may be fatigued from having already done so numerous times over). In response to the anxiety or the continual heightened nervous system arousal, the brain triggers emotional responses, including irritability and even anger.

If another's behavior is seen as annoying, or wrong, we feel a response that tells us that we are not the problem. Someone else is. This can have a temporary calming effect. Our brain is wired to respond this way to manage distress. We blame or focus on others' real or perceived flaws as a way of calming ourselves down.

But that simply explains what is going on when we have