

An Antidote to the Age of Anxiety by Maria Popova

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives,” Annie Dillard wrote in her timeless reflection on presence over productivity — a timely antidote to the central anxiety of our productivity-obsessed age. Indeed, my own New Year’s resolution has been to stop measuring my days by degree of productivity and start experiencing them by degree of presence. But what, exactly, makes that possible?

This concept of presence is rooted in Eastern notions of mindfulness — the ability to go through life with crystalline awareness and fully inhabit our experience — largely popularized in the West by British philosopher and writer Alan Watts (January 6, 1915–November 16, 1973), who also gave us this fantastic meditation on the life of purpose. In the altogether excellent 1951 volume *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* (public library), Watts argues that the root of our human frustration and daily anxiety is our tendency to live for the future, which is an abstraction. He writes:

If to enjoy even an enjoyable present we must have the assurance of a happy future, we are “crying for the moon.” We have no such assurance. The best predictions are still matters of probability rather than certainty, and to the best of our knowledge every one of us is going to suffer and die. If, then, we cannot live happily without an assured future, we are certainly not adapted to living in a finite world where, despite the best plans, accidents will happen, and where death comes at the end.

Alan Watts, early 1970s (Image courtesy of Everett Collection)

What keeps us from happiness, Watts argues, is our inability to fully inhabit the present:

The “primary consciousness,” the basic mind which knows reality rather than ideas about it, does not know the future. It lives completely in the present, and perceives nothing more than what is at this moment. The ingenious brain, however, looks at that part of present experience called memory, and by studying it is able to make predictions. These predictions are, relatively, so accurate and reliable (e.g., “everyone will die”) that the future assumes a high degree of reality — so high that the present loses its value.

But the future is still not here, and cannot become a part of experienced reality until it is present. Since what we know of the future is made up of purely abstract and logical elements — inferences, guesses, deductions — it cannot be eaten, felt, smelled, seen,

heard, or otherwise enjoyed. To pursue it is to pursue a constantly retreating phantom, and the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead. This is why all the affairs of civilization are rushed, why hardly anyone enjoys what he has, and is forever seeking more and more. Happiness, then, will consist, not of solid and substantial realities, but of such abstract and superficial things as promises, hopes, and assurances.

Watts argues that our primary mode of relinquishing presence is by leaving the body and retreating into the mind — that ever-calculating, self-evaluating, seething cauldron of thoughts, predictions, anxieties, judgments, and incessant meta-experiences about experience itself. Writing more than half a century before our age of computers, touch-screens, and the quantified self, Watts admonishes:

The brainy modern loves not matter but measures, no solids but surfaces.

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The working inhabitants of a modern city are people who live inside a machine to be batted around by its wheels. They spend their days in activities which largely boil down to counting and measuring, living in a world of rationalized abstraction which has little relation to or harmony with the great biological rhythms and processes. As a matter of fact, mental activities of this kind can now be done far more efficiently by machines than by men — so much so that in a not too distant future the human brain may be an obsolete mechanism for logical calculation. Already the human computer is widely displaced by mechanical and electrical computers of far greater speed and efficiency. If, then, man's principal asset and value is his brain and his ability to calculate, he will become an unsaleable commodity in an era when the mechanical operation of reasoning can be done more effectively by machines.

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If we are to continue to live for the future, and to make the chief work of the mind prediction and calculation, man must eventually become a parasitic appendage to a mass of clockwork.

To be sure, Watts doesn't dismiss the mind as a worthless or fundamentally perilous human faculty. Rather, he insists that if we let its unconscious wisdom unfold unhampered — like, for instance, what takes place during the "incubation" stage of unconscious processing in the creative process — it is our ally rather than our despot. It is only when we try to control it and turn it against itself that problems arise:

Working rightly, the brain is the highest form of "instinctual wisdom." Thus it should work like the homing instinct of pigeons and the formation of the fetus in the womb — without verbalizing the process or knowing "how" it does it. The self-conscious brain, like the self-conscious heart, is a disorder, and manifests itself in the acute feeling of separation between "I" and my experience. The brain can only assume its proper behavior when consciousness is doing what it is designed for: not writhing and whirling to get out of present experience, but being effortlessly aware of it.

And yet the brain does writhe and whirl, producing our great human insecurity and existential anxiety amidst a universe of constant flux. (For, as Henry Miller memorably put it, “It is almost banal to say so yet it needs to be stressed continually: all is creation, all is change, all is flux, all is metamorphosis.”) Paradoxically, recognizing that the experience of presence is the only experience is also a reminder that our “I” doesn’t exist beyond this present moment, that there is no permanent, static, and immutable “self” which can grant us any degree of security and certainty for the future — and yet we continue to grasp for precisely that assurance of the future, which remains an abstraction. Our only chance for awakening from this vicious cycle, Watts argues, is bringing full awareness to our present experience — something very different from judging it, evaluating it, or measuring it up against some arbitrary or abstract ideal. He writes:

There is a contradiction in wanting to be perfectly secure in a universe whose very nature is momentariness and fluidity. But the contradiction lies a little deeper than the mere conflict between the desire for security and the fact of change. If I want to be secure, that is, protected from the flux of life, I am wanting to be separate from life. Yet it is this very sense of separateness which makes me feel insecure. To be secure means to isolate and fortify the “I,” but it is just the feeling of being an isolated “I” which makes me feel lonely and afraid. In other words, the more security I can get, the more I shall want.

To put it still more plainly: the desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing. To hold your breath is to lose your breath. A society based on the quest for security is nothing but a breath-retention contest in which everyone is as taut as a drum and as purple as a beet.

He takes especial issue with the very notion of self-improvement — something particularly prominent in the season of New Year’s resolutions — and admonishes against the implication at its root:

I can only think seriously of trying to live up to an ideal, to improve myself, if I am split in two pieces. There must be a good “I” who is going to improve the bad “me.” “I,” who has the best intentions, will go to work on wayward “me,” and the tussle between the two will very much stress the difference between them. Consequently “I” will feel more separate than ever, and so merely increase the lonely and cut-off feelings which make “me” behave so badly.

Happiness, he argues, isn’t a matter of improving our experience, or even merely confronting it, but remaining present with it in the fullest possible sense:

To stand face to face with insecurity is still not to understand it. To understand it, you must not face it but be it. It is like the Persian story of the sage who came to the door of Heaven and knocked. From within the voice of God asked, “Who is there” and the sage answered, “It is I.” “In this House,” replied the voice, “there is no room for thee and me.” So the sage went away, and spent many years pondering over this answer in deep meditation. Returning a second time, the voice asked the same question, and again the sage answered, “It is I.” The door remained closed. After some years he returned for the third time, and, at his knocking, the voice once more demanded, “Who is there?” And the sage cried, “It is thyself!” The door was opened.

We don't actually realize that there is no security, Watts asserts, until we confront the myth of fixed selfhood and recognize that the solid "I" doesn't exist — something modern psychology has termed "the self illusion." And yet that is incredibly hard to do, for in the very act of this realization there is a realizing self. Watts illustrates this paradox beautifully:

While you are watching this present experience, are you aware of someone watching it? Can you find, in addition to the experience itself, an experiencer? Can you, at the same time, read this sentence and think about yourself reading it? You will find that, to think about yourself reading it, you must for a brief second stop reading. The first experience is reading. The second experience is the thought, "I am reading." Can you find any thinker, who is thinking the thought, "I am reading?" In other words, when present experience is the thought, "I am reading," can you think about yourself thinking this thought?

Once again, you must stop thinking just, "I am reading." You pass to a third experience, which is the thought, "I am thinking that I am reading." Do not let the rapidity with which these thoughts can change deceive you into the feeling that you think them all at once.

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In each present experience you were only aware of that experience. You were never aware of being aware. You were never able to separate the thinker from the thought, the knower from the known. All you ever found was a new thought, a new experience.

What makes us unable to live with pure awareness, Watts points out, is the ball and chain of our memory and our warped relationship with time:

The notion of a separate thinker, of an "I" distinct from the experience, comes from memory and from the rapidity with which thought changes. It is like whirling a burning stick to give the illusion of a continuous circle of fire. If you imagine that memory is a direct knowledge of the past rather than a present experience, you get the illusion of knowing the past and the present at the same time. This suggests that there is something in you distinct from both the past and the present experiences. You reason, "I know this present experience, and it is different from that past experience. If I can compare the two, and notice that experience has changed, I must be something constant and apart."

But, as a matter of fact, you cannot compare this present experience with a past experience. You can only compare it with a memory of the past, which is a part of the present experience. When you see clearly that memory is a form of present experience, it will be obvious that trying to separate yourself from this experience is as impossible as trying to make your teeth bite themselves.

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To understand this is to realize that life is entirely momentary, that there is neither permanence nor security, and that there is no "I" which can be protected.

And therein lies the crux of our human struggle:

The real reason why human life can be so utterly exasperating and frustrating is not because there are facts called death, pain, fear, or hunger. The madness of the thing is that when such facts are present, we circle, buzz, writhe, and whirl, trying to get the “I” out of the experience. We pretend that we are amoebas, and try to protect ourselves from life by splitting in two. Sanity, wholeness, and integration lie in the realization that we are not divided, that man and his present experience are one, and that no separate “I” or mind can be found.

To understand music, you must listen to it. But so long as you are thinking, “I am listening to this music,” you are not listening.

The Wisdom of Insecurity is immeasurably wonderful — existentially necessary, even — in its entirety, and one of those books bound to stay with you for a lifetime.