

HOW I LEARNED TO CALM MYSELF DOWN

Ken Wilson, 3.11.18

Today is more testimony than sermon. Though it does have a title: *How I Learned to Calm Myself Down*.

About ten years ago, I started experiencing episodes of acute anxiety. Work related. I was quickly becoming out of step with the Evangelical denomination I was a national leader in. I had no beef with evolutionary science or climate science for that matter. Being somewhat naïve, I spoke up on these matters (which didn't seem that controversial to me) and learned otherwise. At the same time, I was in the middle of changing my mind on the LGBT question.

My first panic attack happened day I was supposed to fly to Oslo, Norway to be part of an expedition to the Arctic Circle sponsored by National Geographic. An environmental scientist named Carl Safina had invited me. I was one of 2 religious leaders on the trip to study climate change first hand. Guest list was distinguished: Jimmy Carter, Ted Turner, Larry Page (founder of Google), Madelyn Albright, and Chevy Chase. I was out of my league, spending a week with these people in close quarters.

Two hours before leaving for the airport I started feeling funny (describe panic attack)

Two months later, I went on an Alaskan cruise for some national board meetings for my then-denomination. I told fellow board meetings my concern about the traditional teaching on LGBT. They were alarmed. When the ship got back into port and within TV range, the financial melt-down of 2008 was underway.

My next panic attack occurred on a flight to Minneapolis where a small group of Christian leaders convened by Phyllis Tickle and Brian McClaren were going to talk about sexuality. The small group included some gay leaders burned by the ex-gay ministry sponsored by my denomination. I went to hear their stories. These were not good career moves on my part.

Around that time I developed tinnitus—ringing in ears. Usually it goes away, but for me it just kept going. When this happens it can make people quite anxious (what if this never goes away, what if it gets louder)...for first few months the alarm system is triggered.

Fortunately I had been experimenting with more meditative forms of prayer since 2000. But because of the tinnitus, it was harder to do meditative prayer—made me more aware of ringing in my ears.

I read a book called *The Relaxation Revolution* by a Herbet Benson. Main prescription for lowering anxiety was a 12-minute meditative practice to lower anxiety to trigger “relaxation response” (lowers BP, lowers cortisol—effect last for a day.) So, I forced myself to do my calming prayer practice for 12 minutes—every day for 6 weeks and sure enough it helped me not to pay attention to the constant ringing in my ears. I can live with this.

Psalm 131 became super important to me. I used to ask God to calm me down. (Remember the movie *The Apostle* with Robert Duvall? Gimme peace!) Ps. 131 showed me there’s more to it than that. **God wants me to learn how to calm myself down.** Main image of Psalm 131 (we used it as a meditation last Sunday).

It’s a lot like dental care. You can make having decent teeth the sole responsibility of your dentist. And your dentist can help. But the best thing is if you and your dentist each do your part. You brush your teeth every day twice a day. Avoid drinking a lot of sugar pop. That sort to thing. And you get check ups once year.

FOUR THINGS I DO EVEERY DAY TO CALM MYSELF

I walk. My average steps this year 15,000. I don’t do it to maintain a svelte figure. I do it to calm myself. Rain or shine, snow, I walk.

I created and maintain a calming prayer place at home. Describe. I spend at least a little time every day in my calming place. Bose speaker and Alexa. Candle. Lava Lamp. Model sail boat. Plant.

I developed a prayer routine that I just do whether I’m inspired or not. I use *The Divine Hours* [show]

I do a 12-minute calming meditation time most days. Song: *On the Nature of Daylight* by Max Richter. Alexa knows this song. I tell her to play it and she does. It’s 6 minutes long so I say, play it again and it’s 12 minutes. (Jesus Prayer, or Sarum Prayer)

During my daily walk—I’ll notice if I’m having funky anxious feelings, distressed about something, etc. If I haven’t done it earlier when I get back I go to my calming spot, light a candle, tell Alexa to play *On the Nature of Daylight*, go through my calming prayer routine. Sometimes I’ll **talk to God** about what’s bothering me like God is a very wise

and calm therapist, great listener. Often get reassuring senses or wise thoughts. I jot good one down.

Using this routine for anxiety past 10 years, when the anxiety ramped up in 2008, but I started learning/trying out prayer practices around 2000. I figure I'm easily 20 years older than most of you, so **not too late** for you to start something that works for you. Daily exercise, some calming prayer routine (yoga good)

2014 was my test year for all this. That year, I lost my closest friends, got married after being a widow, moved out my house of many years into my new wife house, became a step dad, missing 4 of my kids who lived far away, and then mother of all religious controversies broke out—super intense phase lasted 5 months.

Good things in my life were awesome, religious controversy was a form of psychological torture.

Old spiritual or blues song, it goes **“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen nobody knows but me.”** True about certain times of trouble: grieving a close loved one, divorce, serious cancer diagnosis & treatment, having to deal with racism as a personal-daily experience, especially in a time when racial animus is being stirred, losing a job and having trouble finding a new one, a mental illness flare up that takes a while to stabilize.

My five months in 2014 like that.

What got me thought that period without getting hospitalized or hooked on heroin: keeping my walking routine, ramping my daily 12-minute calming meditation praying to 3 times a day—morning, before or after dinner, before bed. I am so thankful that I had learned to calm and quite my soul, like a child laying on its mother’s chest.

QUIET REFLECTION: MURMURING

Ps 1 “His teaching he murmurs day and night” (Alter note)

PS 131 “But I have calmed and contented myself like a weaned babe on its mother—like a weaned babe I am with myself”

We murmur things that do not yet exists so that they can begin to exist. Creative form of speech: speaking things into being.