

Panic Attack . . . So it Goes

by Jason_Love

Reality is whatever you focus on.

My grandpa said that the day he was sober.

I didn't know what he meant until last week, when I suffered my first panic attack. If I could describe it in three words, they would be GET ME OUT! One minute I was doing crunches in the gym, and the next moment all my demons were on top of me.

If you've never had a panic attack, it's a little like drowning, but there's no water to make you feel better about it. Inside the gym, I laid on my back and breathed at the ceiling. I needed someone to perform the Heimlich Maneuver for Panic. I would've been lucky to find someone who could spell meathead.

My heart was pounding around in my ribs. I didn't know why. It didn't matter. A chill overcame me like someone had died. I felt the need to get out of the gym, out of my clothes, out of my skin. The sky was definitely falling.

Alan Watts wrote, "In seeing fully into his own empty momentariness, the Bodhisattva knows a despair beyond suicide, the absolute despair which is the etymological meaning of nirvana."

If this was nirvana, Iâ€™d rather be shallow.

The gym-heads continued their reps like nothing had happened. They couldnâ€™t hear the sirens. They didnâ€™t see me melting. I ran to the parking lot, trying to breathe my way back to reality, whatever that was.

You are in control. There is nothing to fear. Thou art Godâ€™!

I circled the lot twice, remembering times when I felt safe. I pictured myself meditating. I couldnâ€™t find my daily self, the guy I had raised from childhood. The sun didnâ€™t feel quite right. It hung overhead like a bulb in the laboratory.

Cars passed by in the street, again without concern. I wished that someone would hit me. It was time for the attack to end. You know, if there were a God and everything. My heart kept shifting up: fourth gear, fifth gear, sixth gear. I started to mumble.

Whatâ€™s the point? Whatâ€™s the point?

This is what my shrink Dr. Bruce calls the Great Sickness—having to understand. The meaning of life is a feeling, he says, and we think ourselves nuts until we learn that. The loneliness crushed me into the soles of my shoes. I couldn't talk myself out of meaninglessness.

“Madness is the inability to not think,” says Dr. Bruce. “Stop it already!”

I staggered back to the gym to gather my burdens. The hello-goodbye girl asked if I were okay. I'm not sure that I answered.

On the way home, I doubled the speed limit, seduced by the idea of dying. Some unseen force goaded me on. Time did not budge. I had stepped into the Looking Glass From Hell. My life flashed before me, only it didn't take a moment but all eternity. So it goes.

At home my wife Yahaira met me at the door.

“What's the matter?” she said, feeling my forehead.

“I’m going crazy.”

Yahaira hugged me, and my brain threw up. It felt like I was falling through the floor. She said I cried. It’s her word against mine.

“I can’t breathe,” I said.

“Should I call the doctor?”

Who, Doctor God? Yes, I would like to see God so that I could punch Him in the nose. This wasn’t a broken arm; it was an existential vacuum. It was the undoing of reason. But you know you’re getting off course when you want to punch God.

Yahaira laid me in bed and turned on the fan. I curled into a cry-baby position and rocked like Rainman. Who’s on first? What’s on second? It made as much sense.

She massaged my neck. I breathed as best I could, but it would have been okay to not breathe. Ever. Yahaira turned on the radio, a tenuous link back to mankind. As much as I detest commercials, they somehow soothed me.

And finallyâ€œmercifullyâ€œI slept.

Next morning, I awoke slowly, afraid to remember. I could have killed someone. I brushed my teeth and made the bed and slipped into my old reality, but something was missing. It was my innocence, or sense of well-being. Even now I tread carefully, unsure when the earth will open up.

They say you can survive an attack by letting the terror wash over you. Thatâ€™s like telling a driver to relax into a head-on collision. If the time comes, I will try it. But if you find me shirtless on the corner muttering about nirvana, youâ€™ll know what happened.

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