

TURNING TOWARD ANXIETY



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*Standing Outside the Shadows, and the Confusion of Things
Still Going Wrong*

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Disclosure modes: Experienced · Observed · Studied

*From Turning Toward —, a philosophy-of-psychology companion to the On —ing
series.*

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Turning Toward Anxiety

Standing Outside the Shadows, and the Confusion of Things Still Going Wrong

This is not therapy, and it is not a replacement for it. If you are struggling with anxiety, a licensed professional can offer you something I cannot: a diagnosis, a treatment plan, and a person in the room. What follows is philosophy and testimony — my theories about myself, my mind, and the Self. If you are in crisis, please reach out. You can call or text **988** (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S., or text **HOME to 741741** to reach the Crisis Text Line. These are here at the top of the page on purpose. You are not alone, and reaching out is a sign of strength.

Look at how far we've come. Or rather, how far I've come.

Turning Toward has been testimony woven with fact, but the largest point I want you to hold is that most of these thoughts have to do with me. Where the *On —ing* series weighed the hypothetical viewpoints of other people and other times, *Turning Toward* has turned the lens back on myself — as an author, and as a real person — to show you how I *chose*, in my own way, to be better. This has never been a replacement for therapy. It has only ever been my theories about myself, my mind, and the Self.

I've lived with anxiety for as long as I can remember. It's been an underlying theme in my neurodivergence for most of my life. I'll be honest, though: I was never formally diagnosed. For years I underreported my symptoms to doctors, because I was afraid of what certain pharmaceuticals might do to me. Early on, someone once gave me something to help me "chill out." In *Turning Toward Addiction* I said I

never blacked out on alcohol alone — and that's true — but I'll admit here that a single beer taken alongside that one pill was enough to erase a night from my memory. The people I was with kept me safe, and made sure I did no harm to myself or anyone else. But I've thought a lot, since, about what might have happened had they not been there.

That was enough for me. I don't like to *not remember*. If I can't remember something, I can't learn from it. *Brain poison* is the name I've quietly attached to those moments.

Anxiety is one of those things that's hard to put your finger on, because it keeps moving around.

In *Turning Toward Depression* I offered a theory: that much of the depression I've known was tied to the past — to old mistakes, to traumas, and to the outcomes those things went on to have in my life. I need to make one clarification here, the same one I made there. Trauma — harm done to you, or harm you did to yourself — is not a mistake you made. Don't let those two things fuse together in your head. Your traumas are not your failures, even though your failures can sometimes be traumatizing.

So, in time, I've come to stand on the other side of my depression, my addiction, and my suicidal thoughts. And here I am now, standing at the door of anxiety.

I'm going to be largely metaphorical with this one. I'm going to reach for one of my favorite images, one I've been living inside — without quite realizing it — ever since I first got a driver's license. I'm going to compare anxiety to the thought process behind operating a motor vehicle.

But first, the theory itself.

Where I suggested that depression, for me, lived mostly in the past, I've found that anxiety lives mostly in the *future*. That's not to say the past has no hand in it. The outcomes of our decisions can send us bouncing back and forth between depression and anxiety — like the needle on a double-pan balance scale after you've dropped a weight on one side. Back and forth, never quite sure which side to rest on.

Hold onto that image, because the whole point of a balance scale is to find the *balance* between two things. In my head, those two things are the past and the future.

Because you're meant to be living in the present.

I found, when I went looking, that I'm not the first to feel my way toward something like this. Carl Jung didn't treat anxiety and depression as diseases in their own right so much as *signals* — surface expressions of something deeper moving underneath. He described psychic energy as something that can flow forward, adapting us to the world and its demands, or flow *backward*, pulling us down into older material we haven't finished with. He called the backward pull *regression*, and he tied it, again and again, to the past — "a relapse into the past caused by a depression in the present." The forward movement, and the fear that comes with it, he tied to the risk of stepping out into an uncertain life. "The perpetual hesitation," he wrote, to "launch out into life."

That maps, almost eerily well, onto my double-pan scale. Depression as the backward pull. Anxiety as the fear that meets us when we face forward, toward the not-yet. And the present — the fulcrum, the balance point — as the only place we actually get to live. Jung even had a name for the thing that holds that tension and makes something new out of it: the *transcendent function*, the quiet engine of becoming whole. I want to be

careful here and mark the seam plainly: Jung never wrote it out as a neat pair, *anxiety equals future, depression equals past*. That symmetry is my inference, built on his scaffolding, not a claim I'm putting in his mouth. But the scaffolding holds.

And I'm in good company beyond Jung, too. Kierkegaard called anxiety "the dizziness of freedom" — the vertigo we feel standing at the edge of our own open future, looking down into everything we *might* do. The existentialists after him said much the same: that dread is the mood of a creature who can see its own tomorrow and doesn't yet know what it will hold. Anxiety, in that light, isn't a malfunction. It's the price of being able to imagine forward at all.

But sometimes we forget that we're supposed to be *here*. Our minds drift. We start turning over things that don't matter in this moment.

Does the future matter? Of course it does. We need food and water. We need shelter from the elements. We've built an entire empire around securing those two simple things. I joke with my loved ones sometimes — "it's funny how we're the only mammals who go into debt just trying to survive."

But are we so separate from the rest of it? I think about the empire we've built around survival, and what it costs the living systems around us. Sometimes I think about *jays*, and I wonder whether the ecology of the planet might set the right fruit in front of us at the right time, if only we understood it and respected it enough to notice. That's a speculation — I want to name it as one. But it isn't a baseless one. There's a real body of knowledge here: traditional ecological and phenological knowledge, the way Indigenous cultures read the budding of a plant or the return of a bird as a signal for when to harvest, so that human activity fell into step with

what the land was already offering, season by season. The stronger claim — that nature would *provide* for us if we treated it rightly — is mine, and I'll own it as philosophy. But the quieter truth underneath it, that ecosystems move in patterns we can learn to live in time with, is not.

And here's something that isn't speculation at all: we have already, permanently, changed the minds and bodies of the creatures living alongside us. Within a span of decades — well within a single human lifetime — lizards in cities have evolved larger toe-pads and longer limbs to grip our smooth walls; moths changed color to match soot-darkened trees and changed back when the air cleared; mice in city parks carry the genetic fingerprints of adapting to us; birds in loud cities now sing at a higher pitch just to be heard over our traffic. Whole species have bent themselves around the fact of us. Evolution is real — but I've come to think it's part of the design, too, not separate from it.

See how quickly a mind can wander off the road when it isn't watching where it's going?

I've digressed hard here. But I'll leave that ecology where it sits, for you to chew on. It matters just as much as the rest.

Let's get back in the car, and drive down the road of anxiety.

The first thing I want to tell you is how I used to struggle with road rage, and how I let it go. Imagine it with me. You're late — for work, for an appointment, doesn't matter which. You put the destination into your GPS, and it tells you, plainly, that you're going to be fifteen minutes late.

The drive is thirty miles. The speed limit is seventy.

Now, here's the thing that took me a long time to really *see*. At seventy miles an hour, thirty miles takes about twenty-six minutes. That's the whole trip. So to claw back fifteen of those minutes — to shave more than half the journey off — you would have to cover those same thirty miles in about eleven minutes. Do the arithmetic and it comes out to roughly **one hundred and sixty-eight miles an hour**. Sustained. The entire way.

There is no number on your speedometer that gets you there. It isn't a risky choice you could make if you were brave or reckless enough. It is simply *not a thing that can happen* in a normal car. The fifteen minutes are already gone. They were gone the moment the trip was fifteen minutes shorter than your lateness. No amount of pressing the pedal down brings them back — it only trades them for danger, because the returns on speed collapse fast: past a point, all that extra velocity buys you is a few seconds and a much worse chance of arriving at all. Speeding is a factor in something like a third of the people who die on our roads every year.

So be fifteen minutes late. Make the conscious choice to be safe.

I try to hold that same lens over the whole timeline of a life. We get so fixed on reaching the finish that we forget the drive there was the entire point. *Stop and smell the roses*, people say, and we snap back, "that's stupid, I have places to be." Do we, though? Why are we all in such a hurry? The destination, in a car or in a life, is not the point. Arriving whole is the point. And you cannot outrun a lateness that has already happened — you can only decide who you'll be for the rest of the drive.

Now let's talk about what's happening *around* us on that road, because this is the part my stepfather taught me when he taught me to drive, and it's the part I'd hand to you if I could hand you only one thing.

You can be the finest driver alive and still have someone come out of nowhere and hit you. So you pay attention. To everything. All the time.

When I drive, I try to show my wife how I can *read* the other cars — not predict the future, nothing like a magic trick, just watch. Most people follow the flow of traffic. A little over the limit, maybe, but steady, no trouble. But some of them have a pattern. Weaving. No turn signals. Trying to get somewhere they can't actually be yet. I know that pattern from the inside, because I used to *be* that pattern. I was the teenager a police officer once pulled over out of a whole pack of speeders — not because I was fastest, but because I was the one weaving, the one being dangerous. He let me off with a warning. I never forgot it.

Once I spot one of those drivers, I realize they're the only one I really need to watch. I'll tell my wife a few seconds before it happens: "look at this person." And then they do the dangerous thing. I didn't see the future. Someone just taught me, a long time ago, to notice the shape of trouble before it arrives — and I get to practice that lesson every single time I leave the house.

Hold that lens over a whole life, and see how it feels.

The last thing I want to leave you with came out of a conversation with someone I love, about *missing a turn*.

We program the destination. The GPS gives us an arrival time, drawn from everyone who's ever driven that road and everyone driving it right now, and we accept it. And sometimes it reroutes us — sends us a way we didn't plan to go. When that happens, it's usually because of what my wife and I call a *fresh situation*: something up ahead we can't see yet.

Let it be.

If you miss a turn, the GPS simply reroutes you. It'll even tell you, calmly, how to turn around at the next dead end. Most missed exits cost you a couple of minutes and nothing more. The whole grid is built to be redrawn. There is always another turn.

Sometimes I let myself believe I missed that turn *for* a reason — that there was a fresh situation up ahead I'll never know about, and that missing the turn was what kept me out of it. I can't prove that. It's just a thing I tell myself so I don't fill up with anger over an honest mistake. And it works. We keep going. When we choose wrong, there is almost always another path.

So don't stress. Don't spend today worrying about a shadow you won't even reach for days. I made this point once with a light bill — why pour yourself out worrying over something you can't touch or change in this moment? It isn't an easy way to think, and I won't pretend I flip it on like a switch. But when I can get there, it brings a peace I don't have better words for.

Let life carry you through it, instead of forever shoving out ahead into parts unknown. Forgive yourself the small mistakes, and drive on.

For a long time, anxiety was something I tried to smother by any means I could find. This is the "falling off the mountain" I've written about — not knowing which side you'll land on. There were stretches where I was so anxious I turned right back to depression, or to addiction, just to stop feeling it. I want to be careful and human about how I say this next part, because everyone's anxiety is different and some of it needs real clinical care that no metaphor can stand in for: what shifted for me, over a long time and with a lot of stumbling, was less a single decision than a slow, practiced turning-toward — learning, drive by drive, to meet the feeling differently

instead of fleeing it. That's my path, not a prescription. Maybe you'll find your own parallel somewhere in these traces.

Love yourself first. Then love others. And remember that most people don't see these things the way you and I are learning to.

So maybe next time, you let the anxious driver pass. Maybe you even let out a small, kind joke about how badly they need to be somewhere. You watch them botch the merge up ahead. And you notice that yes, they got there a few seconds before you — and you were the happier of the two the whole way there.

Try applying that to a life.

