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# Stilling the Storm: Calming the Anxious Soul

by Joseph Grant, M.Div.

## The Cost of Caring

It might be said of any of us living in times like these that if we are not troubled, we may not be paying attention. And paying wholehearted attention might actually serve as a useful description of the central dynamic of prayer. Since spirituality includes and anchors the entirety of lived experience, bouts of anxiety, personal and generalized, can be healthy indicators of deeper self-awareness and lived connection to tragic and traumatic dimensions of our world. We might also attribute such unavoidable anxious moments to the cost of loving, the shadow cast by compassionate care. Only those who care enough to pay attention are capable of perceiving and wrestling with disturbing realities.

Let not your hearts be troubled, trust in God and trust in me.

— John 14:1

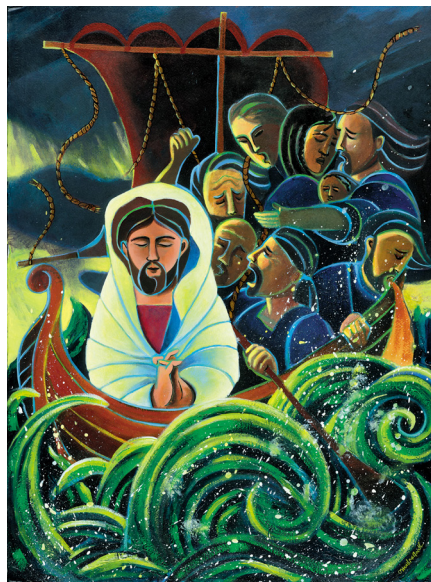
## Invite Deeper Trust

By contrast, careless or care-free living denotes a disconnected, apathetic orientation. Likewise, a “don’t worry, be happy” approach to spirituality deprives us of a depth of wisdom only accessible by traversing the shadowlands of shared suffering. Indeed, authentic spirituality, motivated by a desire for intimate communion with life’s every expression, does not offer an escape from struggles and

impenetrable mysteries. Rather, authentic spirituality invites a broader engagement, even in the face of justifiable anxiety, that engenders and encourages deeper trust.

Jesus woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’

— Mark 4:39a



*“Rock of Ages” by Bro. Mickey McGrath, OSFS, depicting Mark 4:39-41, where Jesus is awakened by the disciples during a violent sea storm, calms the storm, and calms them. Copyright (c) Bee Still Studio. Used with licensed permission.*

## Loosen the Chokehold

At its root, “anxiety” describes a chokehold that constricts our ability to breathe deeply and completely. Obsessive,

fear-filled worry debilitates, diminishing our capacity to embrace abundant life. Worry denies us the deep breath of joy and deprives us of the solace offered by the inspiring, disturbing, and consoling Holy Spirit. How can those caught in the chokehold of chronic anxious agitation find release and stillness? What responses and resources might spirituality and spiritual accompaniment offer?

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing. God alone suffices.

— Teresa of Ávila

## Surrender to Divine Affirmation

Authentic encounters with the indwelling Spirit of Love have two defining characteristics. The first blush is often felt as a penetrating and universal affirmation: “Be at peace, fear not, you are already blessed!” This is followed by an open-hearted invitation to “to taste and see” the great goodness and profound pangs of living. The gentle listening presence of spiritual accompaniment can accentuate and extend this affirming invitation. Even in the midst of turbulence, we can find stillness when we surrender to and are buoyed by an attitude of trust, rather than succumbing to panic and fear.

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# Case Study | Calming an Anxious Deacon

Deacon Mike\* is married, has young children, and serves in an inner-city parish. He characterized his full-time work in law enforcement as “stressful,” since it brings him into direct contact with the harsh realities of crime and incarceration. He also takes a low dose of medication to mitigate what he calls “bouts of depression” and he identified stressors in his work and family life that compound his symptoms.

During a brief meeting with his parish priest, Deacon Mike was encouraged to meet with a trained spiritual director for additional support. Deacon Mike set up an appointment and in their first encounter, revealed a highly developed sense of responsibility that was operating primarily out of moral obligation. He indicated that it was largely this sense of duty which led him to consider the diaconate. Admitting to personal “moral rigidity,” particularly when assessing his own faith life and practice, Deacon Mike revealed disappointment at his lackluster prayer regimen and an inability to balance life, work, and ministerial commitments.



future — for himself, his family, the Church, and the world. Prompted by his spiritual director, Deacon Mike outlined social media habits, including some online resources popular with work colleagues, that served to reinforce his despondency. Trapped in self-judgment and shame, and worried about his expressed “obligation to save souls,” Deacon Mike found himself quietly despairing and paralyzed in a world beyond redemption where he characterized God as “demanding and distant.”

Simply admitting this chokehold of anxiety to a spiritual director proved cathartic and was a significant first, trusting step. This opened a door that enabled Deacon Mike to begin to experi-

Deacon Mike also accepted guidance to fast from social media sites that reinforce fearful and judgmental approaches to religion and relationships. When discerning religious, cultural, and media influences, his spiritual director encouraged Deacon Mike to ask whether the attitudes and worldviews presented mirrored our Maker: “loving, forgiving, and lifegiving”.

In conversation, the spiritual director invited Deacon Mike, in prayer and contemplation, to surrender to a more affirming, liberating, and caring understanding of God. Additionally, Deacon Mike was invited to simplify his prayer practice. This involved punctuating his day with short, and eventually longer, quiet pauses focused on intentional breath awareness. Introducing a daily gratefulness practice further opened Deacon Mike to experience and share life-affirming astonishment and awe. Regularly relocating his prayerful presence to outdoor environments, walking, and spending reflective time in Creation, helped shift his experience of prayer from an obligatory and demanding activity to an invitation into fuller presence and awareness.

Gradual self-acceptance let Deacon Mike reorient his focus and imagination away from constricting impulses that invoked a sense of calamity, and towards care and compassion. His spiritual director challenged Deacon Mike to reframe his call to love and serve as an invitation to “care for” rather than “save” souls. This allowed Deacon Mike to embrace ministry more as a collaborative endeavor, inviting parishioners to participate in God’s restorative work.

Reconciling himself to a loving, merciful God made the liberating message of the Gospel more accessible for himself, his family, the Church, and beyond. The process of accepting the grace in his own emotional frailty Deacon Mike admitted is “a longer journey.” However, his subtle

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In addition, during their spiritual direction meetings, Deacon Mike identified a deep-seated and chronic sense of foreboding at the root of his “restlessness” — a sense of shame which prevented him from sharing this debilitating anxiety with his fellow deacons. He was even trying to conceal “dark thoughts and anxious feelings” from his wife. This fretful undercurrent, more than any life obligation, left him feeling exhausted, isolated, and drained of motivation for prayer and ministry.

Aware that “Christians are supposed to be hopeful,” Deacon Mike feared the

ence God’s loving desire for peace of mind and heart. With gentle persistence, he was given permission to draw his deep fears about disappointment, unworthiness, damnation, and impending calamity into the light of love. Patiently removing self-blame from his dialogue freed Deacon Mike to listen to his anxious forebodings, acknowledge their limits, and eventually find the wisdom gained through self-understanding. Gradually, Deacon Mike was empowered to bare his anxious soul to his spouse, his pastor, and eventually a counselor.

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## Calming the Anxious Soul *continued*

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All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

— Julian of Norwich

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### Breathe Peace

A focus on slower, deeper breathing, the epitome of spiritual expression, permits the release of tension held in body, mind, and heart. Spiritual accompaniment can expose restless souls to ancient prayer practices such as Centering Prayer and Mindfulness Meditation that encourage breath regulation. With patient persistence, restless souls fall into the buoyancy of deeper, wider love and find release. The subsequent sense of liberation allows tense and troubled people to share in wonder, awe, and gratefulness, along with those other fruits of the Spirit intended for all.

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Be still and know that I am God.

— Psalm 46:10

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### Reframe Reality

By widening the frame and deepening dialogue, spiritual accompaniment extends this unconditional affirmation and explores the ongoing invitation to a

fuller life. In tandem with other therapeutic resources, this gentle listening and sharing fosters trust. This trust allows a troubled soul to acknowledge and explore the expressions and sources of acute anxiety in the freshness of an atmosphere free of judgment or shame. With calm encouragement, an anxious person is urged to surrender control rather than wrestle with or try to escape the throttling grip of apprehension. Thus, anxiety can be reframed as a teacher that lays bare the roots of fearfulness.

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Deep trust in life is not a feeling. It is the attitude we call courage ... the attitude of one who goes ahead in spite of anxiety and fatigue.

— David Steindl Rast

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### Seek Consolation in Creation

Jesus sought out wilderness to find clarity and *in extremis* went into the garden. Whether we are disturbed, tired, or vulnerable, the unconditional and affirming embrace experienced when we step out into the fresh air of Creation can transform, however briefly, the quality of every relationship to life. Inviting anxious souls to step outside claustrophobic spaces of mind,

body, and spirit. As a regular practice, this exposes them to the animating, enchanting Spirit of Creation that emboldens, consoles, and revives a flagging spirit. When seeking understanding, it helps to return to the Source. So it is with anxieties that trap us in the darker confines of the mind or a stifling world of woe. In the unconditional hospitality of Creation, the bright warmth of sun, cleansing rains and fresh breezes of our natural habitat mirror the great and mysterious Source of love that brings all things into being.

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Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. Jesus said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

— Mark 4:39b

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Though tempests swirl within and around, when gently encouraged to bring prayerful presence out into the light, together we encounter stillness in the eye of the storm.

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*A former member of the spiritual integration team at Saint Luke Center in Louisville, Joseph Grant currently serves as Director of Holy Hills Hermitage in rural Kentucky.*

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## Case Study *continued*

motivational shift allowed him to enjoy catechetical ministry. When anxious moments resurfaced, Deacon Mike acknowledged, he can “surrender his breath,” entrusting himself to God’s life-affirming love.

Deacon Mike’s story reveals how chronic anxiety can operate below the sur-

face, fueled by polarizing social media and cultural influences. These forces can prey upon the dutiful, whose sense of responsibility requires rigid moral demands. In such a climate the very word “God” can become toxic, leaving anxious souls feeling isolated and unable to trust even them-

selves. Spiritual direction offers liberation by being listened to lovingly and encouraged to trust in the affirming light and love of God that chases fear away.

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*\*For confidentiality reasons, names, identifying data, and other details have been altered.*

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## Dr. Joseph Collins Retires After Decades of Compassionate and Person-Centered Care

Joseph Collins, D.O., the Director of Medical Services at Saint Luke Institute (SLI), recently retired after 21 years of valued service

and leadership. Dr. Collins received his medical degree from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic



Medicine and completed his psychiatry residency training at the Georgetown University Medical Center. He has a board certification from the American Board of Neurology and Psychiatry.

At a recent celebration marking his retirement, current and former staff as well as board members of SLI gathered to wish Dr. Collins well. Many shared their experiences of him warmly, praising him as a man of deep faith, who consistently demonstrates a high level of expertise and kindness toward his clients and colleagues alike. Over a career which has included care for hundreds at SLI, he is treasured for his gentle and holistic approach to care.

Speaking at his retirement event, Dr. Collins was deeply moved by the many positive testimonials, and emphasized how the care approach at SLI featured three “C”s — compassion, commitment, and consecration. In this way, he encapsulated well SLI’s mission of fostering healthy life and ministry for priests, deacons, religious, and all those who minister in the Church.

All at SLI are sincerely grateful to Dr. Collins for his immeasurable contributions and wish him a happy and life-giving retirement!

## Support Saint Luke Institute’s Annual Benefit Through Year’s End

As this edition of LukeNotes goes to the printer, we are preparing for our Annual Benefit in Washington, D.C., on October 21. The Benefit provides crucial support for our mission of providing the highest quality mental health treatment and education for Catholic clergy and religious. A highlight of this year’s event is the presentation of the Saint Luke Award to Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States. This honor is given annually to someone whose professional life or charitable works embody the ideals of the Institute: the rebuilding of the spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual life of those in need.



Cardinal Christophe Pierre speaks at a prior SLI Annual Benefit event

If you have not had a chance to make a donation in support of the Benefit, it is not too late! You can donate in any of these ways:

- Online at [SLI.org/benefitsupport](https://SLI.org/benefitsupport) (use the QR code below to access the link on your phone)
- By mail through the *LukeNotes* donation envelope you received with your mailed newsletter
- By sending a check to our mailing address (below), including ATTN: Annual Benefit under “Saint Luke Institute” in the address on the envelope.



Details about the event are available at [SLI.org/benefit](https://SLI.org/benefit). Check our next issue for photos and a report from the event.



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