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Lutheran Higher Education in the Land of Anxiety

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JON MICHEELS LEISETH

Lutheran Higher Education in the Land of Anxiety

“Anxiety, there are some things I want to say to you—OK, there are actually quite a few things I want to say to you, but we only have a few moments. You’re busy. I get it. In fact, when I returned to Concordia September 2016, the single thing that surprised me the most was your presence on campus—you’re *everywhere!*”

“I think you need to back off. I’m talking about your relationship with Student Body. Here’s the thing: Student Body is just not themselves when you’re around. Haven’t you noticed? It’s like they’re vibrating. Like they can’t land. They can’t focus. Or think clearly. They don’t sleep well. Sure, it’s exciting when you’re around. You come on like a roller coaster. But eventually, you’re plain old exhausting.

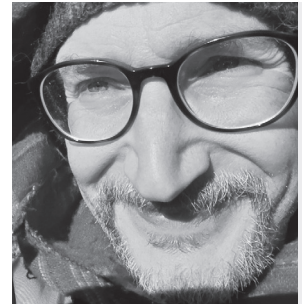
“Student Body asked me to talk with you. They need time to catch their breath. They said they want out, Anxiety. That’s why they asked me to talk with you. They told me about how you’ve been showing up lately. They said they don’t want to keep on like this. They don’t want to always be ramped up, worried that you’re going to pop up. They want to focus on school and when you’re around it’s like they’re always in crisis mode. Sometimes, they said to me (and these are *their* words), they can’t even see what’s going on around them—they can’t see today, let alone life after graduation.

“Student Body wants their life back, Anxiety. Lately, it’s like they’re not even present in their own life at all. They told me to tell you to leave them alone.”

In September of 2016, I left behind my wife and kids (temporarily), my South African “family” and home (physically), and my work as Associate Country Coordinator of the ELCA’s Young Adults in Global Mission, or YAGM, program in Southern Africa (permanently). I returned to the United States in order to begin working as Minister for Faith and Spirituality in Action with Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. I expected my return to be challenging. I anticipated jet lag. I envisioned some difficulty in reorienting to walking on the right-hand side of

sidewalks and hallways, to driving on the right side of the road. I predicted using some words that didn’t translate to United States English conversation (i.e. “Eish!”) and pronouncing a few others like a Brit (i.e. “herb”). I expected disorientation in shifting from several cultures which value relationship, tradition, and the communal over task, innovation, and the individual. I expected to face my own anxiety upon occasion. What I did not expect was the visceral and pervasive presence of anxiety throughout the college community.

Jon Micheels Leiseth serves as Minister for Faith and Spirituality in Action at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. Prior to this, Leiseth lived in South Africa with his wife, Rev. Tessa Moon Leiseth and their kids, Isaac and Sophia. Tessa and Jon served as Country Coordinator and Associate for the ELCA’s Young Adults in Global Mission program in Southern Africa.



A few months into my work with Concordia, and in the midst of a conversation with my colleague, Dr. Michelle Lelwica (Chair of Concordia's Religion Department and author of *Shameful Bodies: Religion and the Culture of Physical Improvement*), I found myself again referencing this tangible and common experience of a communal, even cultural anxiety. Our fuller conversation included discussing my recent research into healing trauma.

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Dr. Lelwica suggested that perhaps anxiety is a sort of constant, low-lying trauma. This thought built a bridge to my introductory work with trauma, work which drew from my own daily practices and came to fruition as my master's thesis for Luther Seminary. The thesis combined the creation of a holistic six week daily healing practice with a theoretical paper grounded in the work of Bessel van der Kolk and Serene Jones, and in healing stories, such as that of Matthew Sanford. Dr. Lelwica's comment connecting anxiety and trauma opened my eyes to insights, resources, and practices which might be helpful in our shared commitment to students' whole selves.

My intent here is to contribute to the ongoing conversation about young adults, anxiety, and college. The connection between anxiety and trauma can shine light on an area of particular importance in Lutheran higher education, namely vocation, with its interwoven relationship with storytelling.

Discerning Vocation in Crisis

Can one creatively discern present and future vocations while under duress, while experiencing anxiety, or otherwise in crisis mode? I once discussed this question with Philip Knutson, a regional representative with the ELCA. Knutson was spending time with the 2012-2013 group of YAGM volunteers during a retreat at our home in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. When the YAGM volunteers later heard of the conversation, one of them lit up

with discovery and relief: "No wonder I can't discern my vocation. I'm in crisis mode!" If Lelwica is right in interpreting anxiety as a form of trauma—as a form of chronic and potentially debilitating crisis on a variety of levels (including physical, mental, emotional, relational)—then we can learn a good deal. In the words of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk: "This [trauma] is about your body, your organism having been upset to interpret the world as a terrifying place. And yourself as being unsafe. And it has nothing to do with cognition" ("Restoring"). According to Babette Rothschild, symptoms include "chronic hyperarousal of the autonomic nervous system" (7). This translates to changes in heart rate, in cortisol, in digestion and elimination, in ability to downshift to calm one's mind and sleep. Maslow's hierarchy of needs comes to mind: we can't possibly discern core commitments, meaning, and purpose when dealing with (a lack of) foundational necessities. When basic needs such as safety and security are of immediate concern (whether actual or perceived or both), they eclipse the potential to engage in activities such as reflection and discernment.

For many on our campuses, vocation is about telling one's story—about authoring (or co-authoring) an account of oneself that is durable, purposeful, and empowering. That ability to find and tell the story of oneself is truncated or simply hijacked under duress. For someone with PTSD, for example, the traumatic event is not recalled or even remembered, and so cannot be retold. It is relived. And because of how the brain has processed (and not processed) the event, it is relived every time it reappears. What is more, reliving the traumatic event calls up the same psychophysical responses, which interrupt and disorient the person. There is no relief from understanding a moral or lesson or meaning of the life-story. Indeed, there is no story. There is only being plunged into the traumatic experience again and again.

While I'm not claiming that the anxiety of "average" college students registers at the level of PTSD, the problems for story-telling and vocation-finding are not dissimilar. Just last week, I was in the presence of a student heading into what became a full-blown anxiety episode. When the student later shared their story of that day, it appeared to me that anxiety served as the organizing principle. The ebb and flow of anxiety not only

shaped the story, it became the central character and strongly influenced the tone of the story. The story, in a sense, became anxiety's story and not the student's. Finally, when anxiety exerts such control on one's story, little space remains for consideration of other "characters," or what the Lutheran tradition calls one's neighbor. When one's own story is frequently hijacked by trauma or anxiety, little capacity exists to hear, let alone listen to the story of one's neighbor.

Acting in the Face of Anxiety

What can be done? Both Kolk and Rothschild point towards the efficacy of psychophysical approaches to healing trauma, including practices such as yoga and intentional breathing. I am most interested in their work because I want something I can choose and embody, something I can do in the face of anxiety. I imagine others would echo this desire. And this brings me to my concluding thoughts, thoughts about communal and individual action.

Dr. Lisa Sethre-Hofstad serves Concordia in the role of Vice President for Student Development and Campus Life. Days before writing this article, I listened as she shared statistics regarding levels and rates of anxiety on campus. The numbers surprised me as they were lower than I anticipated. I also hesitated because I heard in her interpretation of those numbers what I first took as minimizing the prevalence and intensity of anxiety among the student body. It seemed that she refuted anxiety as a problem. I've come to learn that what Dr. Sethre-Hofstad especially refutes is a *problem-centered* approach. She suggests, instead, that the college intentionally step into a radically different paradigm—one that emphasizes the *resourcefulness* of today's students for complex and successful lives. A sure way to increase a person's stress is to place the locus of control outside of that person.

During that same fall workshop, I led a breathing practice in which a proportionately longer exhale physiologically sends messages of safety to the body, uprooting anxiety and seeding presence, mindfulness, calming. Dr. Ernest Simmons (Concordia religion professor) shared with me that many in his department start classes with similar exercises. Students love it, he said, and then lamented that many confess it to be the quietest part of their day.

How do we as members of college communities create spaces and practices of grounding quiet, of calming, of psychophysical safety? How do we empower students to find their own grounding, calm, and safety in the midst of what appears to be incessantly fast-paced, highly-stimulated, and ever-shifting lives? How do we encourage and equip

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students to claim what is within their control, including their very breath? How do we role model healthy ways of thinking, being, and doing—not only for their sakes but also for the common good?

When I returned to the United States from South Africa, I frequently thought of myself as having entered the Land of Anxiety. Now over a year and a half later, I have taken steps to travel elsewhere and am encouraged to continue this journey with this creative, insightful, and caring community.

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