

# salvaged by mystics

Since 9/11 a new type of mystic teacher has emerged to calm today's terrorized world. These teachers point to a home beyond the troubled homeland of contemporary worries



.COMMUNICATION

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## KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 19 Sekunden

After the "Age of Anxiety" we're living now in the 21st century's "**Age of Terror.**"

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Therefore mystic teachers emerge to calm our terrorized nerves. They offer personal awakening from the terrorized imagination.

The "**Age of Anxiety**" set the stage for the 21st century's "Age of Terror." World wars and revolutions in the 20th century stimulated the exploration of *Angst* (Martin Heidegger, 1927) which later became the theme of W.H. Auden's 1948 Pulitzer-winning 80-page poem "The Age of Anxiety," which in turn provided literary material for Leonard Bernstein's *Second Symphony: The Age of Anxiety* (premiere 1949). Walther Krüger's 1972 book *Das Gorgonenhaupt* revealed the anxious undercurrent running through 20th century music, art, and literature. Swooping roofs in modern architecture and ruptured tonalities in modern music became, for Krüger, dramatic forms that cringe under threat-filled skies of mutually assured destruction (MAD) brought by the Cold War. If such sobering topics occupied the preceding century, what can we expect from the mood of terrorism, the *Stimmung* of insecurity? May we one day contemplate Frank Gehry's architectural achievements, like Disney Hall in Los Angeles, as flying hunks of explosive shrapnel?

Terror differs from Angst. The phenomenological analysis of *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger) distinguishes Angst from fear: "Die Angst ist die Bedingung der Möglichkeit der Furcht." Angst transcends any specific object or threat: "Das Wovor der Angst ist das In-der-Welt-Sein als solches." The temporal horizon of human finitude (*Dasein*) casts an anxious shadow over any lasting security: "Die Angst enthüllt dem Dasein die Unheimlichkeit." Fundamental insecurity is the opportunity to embrace the specifics of our individual life situations and to construct our lives resolutely as self-aware, thoughtful individuals (Kierkegaard). Home becomes a personal achievement, not a given fact of life to be taken for granted.

But Heidegger's analysis, like Auden's poem, explores the personal side of anxious *Unheimlichkeit* that pre-dates the phenomenon of terrorism. Both Angst and terror share the mood of insecurity, but terror is literally, not analytically, about one's home or homeland. The threat to security comes not from inherent finitude but from the threat of actual destruction. The response to terror, unlike Angst, cannot take refuge in stronger buildings and creative dwellings. The terrorist threat arrives not through generalized awareness of personal finitude but through specific images, such as the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center or the bombed out craters of an Israeli wedding. The political intent of terrorism targets public imagination. Electronic media replay what traumatizes the imagination. The psyche fixates on specific details of devastation, while

after-images make us see normally serene landscapes as imminent ruins. Terrorism undermines the presumed safety of everyday surroundings so that "home" itself, the matrix of security, no longer calms and reassures. "Homeland security," once lost, becomes the most precious political commodity. The fundamental obligation of government to protect its population generates a new "war against terror" by projecting the battlefield far away where armies are sent to defend an abstract home. Once unsettled by terrorism, the wound of insecurity is not healed by "going shopping." Threats from bioterrorism, nuclear dirty bombs, and chemical pollutants become debilitating vampires that loom larger than the free-floating Angst of existential psychology. Mobile technology and air travel weaken the felt sense of stable home, and the terrorist threat converts mobile cell phones into instruments for warfare that would astonish Carl von Clausewitz.

The broad theme of insecurity, one might argue, is nothing new when placed alongside the story of Genesis where Adam and Eve, thrown out of home in Paradise, face future responsibilities. Fear of the Lord and *memento mori* play important roles in Christian theology. The free-market Lockean self submits to a stringent work ethic motivated by continuous competition and by shifting economic forces. Evolution and natural selection insure that the developed brain checks and re-checks whatever tools it cannot neglect without peril, even to the point where the brain gets trapped in a dysfunctional loop of compulsive worry. A whole village can become unified in its isolation by remaining terrified of what lies beyond its borders, as in the tale told by M. Night Shyamalan's movie *The Village*. Dragons may exist as long as we feel compelled to prepare for them.

**Slaying dragons and subduing demons** is the perennial task for mystics. Every civilization in crisis finds teachers who point to a realm that exists somewhere beyond its troubles. The robes of the mystic fit well the Zen theorist Alan Watts who, along with Aldous Huxley, prescribed for 20th century ills the "wisdom of insecurity." The beatnik and hippie cultures of the 1960s and 70s embraced Watts as a philosopher of the open road. For them, security was an embarrassing bourgeois obsession in need of liberation. In the world after 9/11 2001, however, security is not something to scorn while we hit the road. Instead, the antidote to personal insecurity appears in the form of personal practices. Classes in meditation for health and serenity (yoga, tai chi, chi kung) have blossomed since 2002. Another type of mystic teacher has emerged to calm today's terrorized world. These teachers point to a home beyond the troubled homeland of contemporary worries. They offer personal awakening from the terrorized imagination.

Two outstanding proponents of healing the imagination are Eckhart Tolle and Byron Katie. Both receive much recent attention through their books, recordings, and workshops. Tolle's book has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list for many months and was translated into 30 languages. Byron Katie presents her teachings in many countries of the world and enjoys a widespread following. Both Eckhart Tolle and Byron Katie were once victims of obsessive thought patterns and they learned how to break these vicious cycles of worry. They offer different but com-

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**Eckhart Tolle liberates through** "the power of Now," the title of his main book to date. Tolle, now living in Vancouver, Canada, was born in 1948 in Lunen, Germany, and was educated in England at the Universities of London and Cambridge. At age 29, he went through a painful personal breakdown, in which his thought patterns became too painful to sustain. Abandoning his previous work in academia, Tolle spent several years in a transformation that withdrew him from normal life. He learned how to break obsessive self-constructs – the sense of who you are in your social role, possessions, external appearance, successes and failures, belief system, and relationships – by returning to the simple presence beyond all thoughts, the Now moment, the silent background on which all phenomena are floating.

Eckhart Tolle – whose name sounds like an unlikely amalgam of two 14th century mystics, the Dominican Meister Eckhart of Erfurt (1260–1328) and the British Richard Rolle of Hampole (1300–1349) – has created a lucid writing style that conveys a continual return to Now that brings the reader to appreciate "the spaces" in the prose, to pause, breathe, and listen to the silent presence that underlies all activities of reading, understanding, or thinking. Tolle's audio recordings likewise point frequently not to the articulated thoughts but to the beingness of the moment underlying thoughts so that the listener feeds on the silent pauses as much as on the flow of his words. His communication is about discovering one's innate, indwelling peace, stillness, and aliveness. Chains of obsessive worry break, allowing the space of presence to expand and to gradually swallow the imaginary self that operates in conventional space and time.

The workshops where Tolle presents his teachings often lead to the formation of small groups that later meet locally. In Redondo Beach, California, where I live, for example, a group of a dozen participants meets twice monthly at a local home, where the host Laurie plays a 15-minute portion of an audio or video recording from one of Tolle's talks, then the group sits silently for 15 minutes, after which another short recording is played until the meeting ends. Laurie first encountered the *Power of Now* materials at one of Eckhart Tolle's week-long workshops in Costa Rica. Her meetings embody the title of Tolle's most recent book *Stillness Speaks*.

**Byron Katie began** teaching after a similar crisis. Based in Barstow, California, in the high desert northeast of Los Angeles, she was a successful businesswoman and mother. In her 30s, she became severely depressed and her de-

pression deepened over a 10-year period. Katie spent almost two years seldom able to leave her bed, being obsessed with suicide. Then, one morning in 1986, from the depths of despair, she experienced a life-changing realization. Barely able to crawl across the floor, she received a sudden flash of insight that began an amazingly rapid recovery. What she saw was the way her beliefs about the world were filtering her experience and causing her depression.

The obsessive stories that ran through her head ("My husband should love me more," "My children should appreciate me," "What am I doing wrong?") suddenly melted before the truth of the present moment right before her. She discovered that life had been diminished through the stories playing through her head about work, love, and self. Once the stories stopped, she saw through them and life became precious. Her sudden liberation astounded her family and associates. As she tried explaining the change to them, she developed a series of steps, called "the work," which initiate a similar process of enlightenment in others. As she became Byron Katie, her "work" was to simplify, formulate, and perfect the liberating process. The process is to write down on a piece of paper one of the compulsive complaints that run through the mind. The work is performed one story at a time by subjecting each story to four questions: *Is it true? Can you absolutely know that it's true? How do you react when you think that thought? Who would you be without the thought?*

On the surface disarmingly simple, the process proves powerfully effective, especially when demonstrated by Katie on her many audio and video recordings. The "work" as we have it on record shows people going through profound insight into themselves, often culminating in heart-felt laughter and self-recognition, ending with immense joy in finding a way out of the dark tunnel of fears and terror. Byron Katie spreads the "work" not so much through books as through live workshops and interactive public interviews with individuals who are attending the "school of life," as she calls the process ("Go home and do the work. Write it down, answer the four questions, and turn it around. Allow the work to become a daily habit.")

The Age of Anxiety has become the *Age of Terror*. But the increased global pressures that undermine the comforts of home can also, if these mystics are right, provide a springboard for exploring a home that exists before this world was born, our original fresh face before we took seriously all the stories we tell ourselves about our contemporary fate. ■

## DER AUTOR

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