

# A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PANIC

RICHARD GROSSINGER



KAREN TWEEDY-HOLMES

**PANIC IS AN EXISTENTIAL STATE. NO MATTER HOW** its attributes are squeezed into diagnostic criteria and medicalized, it remains an irreducible condition of being.

Our basic situation in this realm is profoundly terrifying. We simply appear here, helpless in bodies; we are given no instructions, no explanation; at our demise, we face extinction, or worse. The Yaqui sorcerer Don Juan Matus warned his disciple Carlos Castaneda that an insatiable eagle-like spirit awaits our deaths to pounce on, tear apart, and devour our souls. The Russian esoteric philosopher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff preached that, unless we transmute our essence into a higher compound during life, the moon will swallow us at our end, igniting our remains; our pyres will then light the universe as suns. Not comforting propositions.

Gurdjieff was saying, in effect, that anyone who wasn't freaking out wasn't aware of his or her predicament. He said that if any of us could be shown our actual situation, we would find existence intolerable.

Nonetheless, people do not panic (usually) because of a vulture spirit or lunar cauldron; they are haunted by more mundane fears, and sometimes they panic with no discernible cause.

**THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, I HAVE EXPERIENCED TWO** types of panics. One is concrete, has a clear focus, and is usually alleviated by withdrawal of the cause of fear. The other is cosmic, undifferentiated, and nihilistic, and it cannot be reassured. It feeds off a terror that the universe itself is essentially warped or malevolent, that existence is hopeless, and that there is nothing to be done and nowhere to hide. Death is no solace either, because it will land one in a hell realm among cruel, antipathetic monsters. The only imaginable remedy is to be totally expunged from existence, along with all my thoughts and memories, my past and my future — not just not to be, but never to have been.

My cosmic panics can be quite brief, but on a few occasions one has persisted for months. Five or ten years may also pass between occurrences. Though the sensations of my “big panic” have changed over time, its essential content has not. In early childhood I lay in bed and stared at a dark window overlooking a courtyard that reverberated with the sound of an opera singer practicing. I imagined diabolical creatures staring coldly at me from the vistas of deep space. I imagined a dungeon at the bottom of stone stairs into which prisoners were cast forever. I imagined that my brain could be stolen and put into an insect's body.

As an adult, I have experienced this panic as an existential emptiness, the oppression of a demonic or spiritless universe. It permeates my dreams, and I wake terrified, often with a

start, feeling as though I am in the wrong body, in the wrong universe. “Being” itself is agonizing. I dread going back to sleep because it will plunge me deeper into a heartless void.

My nightmares then are not classic nightmares; I am not chased, threatened, drowned, or pushed over a cliff. The dreams are of hauntingly ordinary events, yet I awaken from them more frightened than from any “real” nightmare. Getting up, I walk frantically through the house, looking for anywhere to alight. I stare out the window at lights and buildings, but they all seem flat and incapable of rescuing me. I am doomed to a barren existence.

The sensation is that time has stopped, that I have moved outside of time into a place where nothing can live. My intimation is that, if only I could get time moving again, I could arouse a flicker of hope. Yet monumental effort is required to push a single moment forward; each second takes forever to elapse, and then there is another, and another.

It takes an internal shift to end this kind of panic. Clouds traveling across a blue sky, a flock of geese, or some other simple natural event can suddenly reconnect me to the living world. For one reason or another, time starts moving again. The dark vision detaches itself and slides away. The panic is still there, but it is outside of me; I am allowed to live.

**BECAUSE OF MY PANICS, AND ALSO MY BED-WETTING** and general antisocial behavior, I was put into psychoanalysis on my eighth birthday, in the fall of 1952. I spent the next five years in therapy with renowned Freudian Abraham Fabian. (I would have remained with him longer, but he died when I was thirteen.)

In the neo-Freudian view, a panicking person has unknowingly regressed and is experiencing infantile crises and rages that could not be worked out at the time. The neo-Freudian treatment for anxiety and panic is to educate the person about the infantile cause of his or her terror and alienation, and then, with the therapist playing the role of parent or other formative figure, to reenact the primal event in a supportive way that leads to emotional clarity. Suffering and pain are not eliminated, but they are keyed to appropriate objects so that delusions igniting anxiety and panic do not roam free.

This method of treating panic is now antiquated to the point of appearing almost prescientific. In our post-Freudian, psychotropic era, panic has been redefined as a chemical defect or imbalance, often genetically inherited. Traumatic events, while not ignored altogether, are presumed not to cause panics so much as to push people with marginal biochemistry over the edge.

Dr. Fabian treated my panics in traditional Freudian fashion. He summed them up with a single epigraph: “You are afraid something terrible is going to happen to you.” He repeated this so often that it came to sound like the lyrics of a popular song or the proverb at the end of one of Aesop's fables. By this yardstick he proceeded to explore, using symbolic connections, my stories, my dreams, my relationships with my family — all aspects of my life — trying to elicit some clue as to what had originally traumatized me. He gave me the impression that

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there was a single event which, if I could remember it, would break the spell, freeing me from fear forever.

**MY MOTHER ALSO PANICKED, AND HER SIEGES WERE** chilling to me. She alternately cried hysterically, screamed that she was dying, attacked me, threw things, or lay semi-comatose in her bed with only a dim candle-shaped bulb lighting her room. Her panics dominated the mood of our household. But she would have nothing to do with psychoanalysis and even opposed my going. I was sent to therapy because my father, whom she had divorced, made her take me.

My mother eventually committed suicide. Though at times her suicide seems maudlin and narcissistic to me, when I am in a panic, I totally understand it.

Through my time with Dr. Fabian, I came to associate my

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*I had been told so relentlessly throughout childhood that I was sick, damaged, and unable to take care of myself that, whether I accepted this prognosis or not, I behaved as though my being were intrinsically irreparable. It never occurred to me that everyone is broken and struggling in some way.*

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panics with not only my mother's moods but also some lost event inside me. I believed him when he said that everything would be solved by his divination, but at heart I could not imagine being without my fears. After all, it was the universe I feared, and what was going to change the universe?

It is quite possible that I would not even use the word *panic* for my experiences had I not been granted it by Dr. Fabian in childhood, at the same time that I was initiated into reading and arithmetic. My subsequent behavior and experiences were colored both by his interpretation of what I was undergoing and by my extrapolations of his oracles. Once named, my experiences obeyed their definition, which also provided an acceptable terminology for discussing my "condition" with others. "Panic" gave me an identity, a reason for being terrified when others weren't, and a way to communicate my difference to them. I could say, "I am having a panic attack," and it would draw instant recognition, making my restless terror and wildness merely clinical. (It would also preclude me from exploring panic on its own terms.)

I began to valorize and appreciate panic. It made me special, like someone from another, perhaps better world. I had to be careful not to get sucked into this world so deeply that

I forgot who I was. But panic was better than submission to authorities or norms. It kept the drama going. Panic became a self-fulfilling prophecy, a gift that was also a curse.

To a certain degree, I was inventing panic from the outside in, scaring myself in order to escape a vision quest for which I wasn't ready. I replaced my quest with dialogues with Dr. Fabian. This unintentional plan then gathered its own momentum, making panics a requisite of intellectual curiosity, a birthright, an entitlement to act crazy, a way to squirm through life's many ambushes and hazards.

**I HAD MY FIRST SIGNIFICANT PANIC ATTACK AS AN** adult in the spring of 1964, about eight years after my last childhood panic and shortly after I began going out with the woman who was to become my wife. I navigated this and ensuing panics mostly on my own for about eleven years, except for three occasions when I saw a psychiatrist or counselor on a short-term basis.

In the summer of 1975, two years after my last psychiatric session, I saw a bioenergetic therapist, and my work with him commenced an odyssey of engaging my panics somatically and energetically rather than psychotherapeutically. In other words, I looked for answers in the body, rather than in the mind. This journey came to include not only Reichian-based bioenergetics (1975-1978) but t'ai chi ch'uan (1975-1997); Lomi breathwork with Gestalt therapy and shiatsu (1977-1992); craniosacral therapy, visceral manipulation, somatoemotional release, and Feldenkrais Method (1990 on); Cheng Hsin martial-arts mindwork, boxing, and *hsing-i* (1991-1997); acupuncture and Chinese herbs (1992 on); rebirthing (1992-1994); and Rolwing (1994-2000); plus briefer stints of Breema, Polarity Therapy, alchemical hypnosis, *chi gung*, Alexander Technique, Bates Method, Body-Mind Centering, Continuum, Reiki, homeopathy, and Integrated Manual Therapy.

All of the above share the premise that deep-seated trauma or anxiety is lodged in neuromusculature, viscera, breath, eye movements, and behavioral patterns. Thus the trauma can be addressed on the spot, without psychological digging. It can literally be touched, eased, and unwound by palpation, breath, visualization, and yoga. And if the psychosomatic component of a trauma can be identified and released, then the habitual anxiety underlying it will also dissipate. The story underlying the trauma can be liberated too, although since it is part myth, part memory, what actually happened is not as important as how it is presently maintained and revalidated in the body.

My journey through these psychospiritual modalities deepened my experience of the universe immeasurably. I learned to transform anxiety and tension into positive energy and to accept these terrifying upsurges of thoughts and sensations as messages from the unconscious, sacred lessons from the dark spirits of the universe.

Yet my many therapies have not affected the inner core of my panics.

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