

Random Thoughts

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

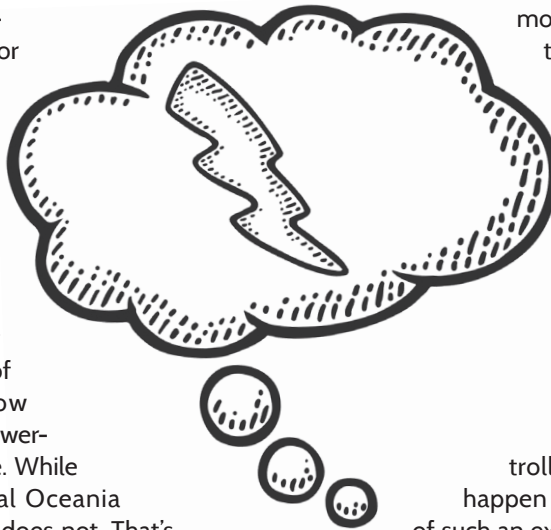
George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, first published in June 1949, is often described as a partial response to the rise of totalitarian regimes. Central to this groundbreaking novel were the secret enforcers of the superstate Oceania, the "thought police." They discovered and punished "unapproved thoughts" called "thought-crime" and "crimethink." For such thoughts, the people of Oceania could get into severe trouble.

To the best of my knowledge, no thought police are at work today. If they were, they would most certainly not be representative of our heavenly Father. God is not afraid of thoughts, no matter how seemingly distressing or powerful they might seem or be. While the rulers of the fictional Oceania might fear thoughts, God does not. That's primarily because thoughts have no actual power. Human beings can't just think something into reality. There is no "thought ray" that we project that controls and guides what happens next. Words, even powerful words, are not magic. That's the stuff of fiction—unless, of course, you suffer from scrupulosity. Unfortunately, to a sufferer of scrupulosity, thoughts

and words can feel very real and are frightening. And that fear certainly is real.

Although there are many studies about the whole thinking process, no one knows for sure exactly how thoughts emerge. We know thoughts have something to do with neurons and something to do with syntax. We understand most of the biology that supports the idea of random energy that is generated. We understand that thoughts are often generated by stimuli and circumstances that we experience. It is possible that they have some relationship to our shared experiential history and evolutionary prehistory that comprise part of what it means to be human.

Random, unfiltered, uncontrolled, and disturbing thoughts happen to everyone. No one is free of such an experience, except perhaps the masters of the practice of mindfulness, such as Zen masters, and even they sometimes struggle. Our ability to think is part of our nature. Since thoughts are so tied to our humanity and all of our experiences, it is impossible to remove them, no matter how much energy we exert in trying. This especially includes thoughts that we believe are unacceptable or disturbing.



In fact, the more energy we devote to attempting to cleanse our minds of what we might perceive as an intrusive thought, the more powerful the thought becomes.

Mindfulness is a spiritual practice that accepts what is. It doesn't direct personal energy toward the removal of something. No energy is focused on removing. Rather, energy is focused on accepting, on being at peace. The mindfulness practice integrates the human person into the real ebb and flow of what it means to be human. To be mindful means to "go with the flow" instead of fighting against it.

For a scrupulous person, the lesson of a practice of mindfulness is very helpful. Even if a person is unable to enter into a formal mindfulness practice, it is nonetheless important to understand and agree that it is far more effective to accept rather than to resist. If a person can come to a managed perspective in his life that permits him to accept the randomness and even the energy of thoughts, that is a good thing. A managed perspective means we give no additional energy to unfocused and intrusive thoughts. We don't focus on or interpret their meaning, good or bad. The result is more and more a sense of peace and less and less a sense of struggle with the fear and anxiety that accompanies the useless energy that's sometimes devoted to what can't be managed or contained.

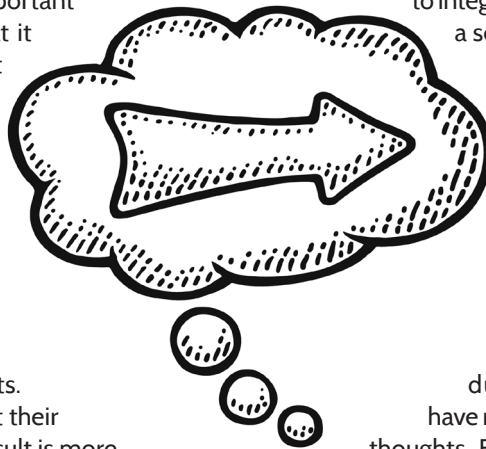
Undoubtedly some readers of this newsletter will respond with a sense of horror to my suggestion to practice mindfulness. How could I possibly recommend a spiritual practice that is not Christian? In truth, what I'm recommending is very Christian. In fact, it's one of the oldest spiritual practices in the Christian spiritual tradition. Christians may not know it as "mindfulness" but rather as a contemplative practice, centering prayer, learning to live in the present moment, silent meditation, or a variety of

other practices. I chose to identify it as a practice of mindfulness because for those of you who might be searching for help and direction, mindfulness is a key, helpful word that will guide you in the right direction to begin implementing the practice that I believe you will find useful.

I also want to say a few words about responding with a sense of horror to ideas or suggestions. If you take the time to examine something that initially repels you, you may well find that there is something in the idea that you have been avoiding or that you sense may be helpful. Thus, the supposed "horror" is nothing more than a defense mechanism that is effectively blocking you from a real opportunity to integrate, become whole, and achieve a sense of peace and freedom. You won't always find something helpful when you're horrified but—more often than not—you will.

Random, intrusive, and unsettling thoughts are among the most common experiences for people with scrupulosity. Remember that the scrupulosity doesn't produce the thoughts. All people have random, unsettling, and intrusive thoughts. But people with scrupulosity often perceive fear and experience anxiety when such thoughts occur. As a result of the feelings associated with some thoughts and the false belief that a strong feeling must somehow equal a serious or mortal sin, thoughts seem to be a focus of the struggle for people with scrupulosity.

We can't control our thoughts. We can, however, learn to manage how we perceive our thoughts, and we can manage the feeling that we assign to their meaning. A practice of mindfulness can be a great help to a person who struggles with scrupulosity because the practice helps people better understand and accept what it means to be human with random thoughts. ✨



The Glory of Our Passing World

The gradually fading glory of autumn is also a gentle hint of death. Fall is the sunset of summer. When the fields are harvested and the fruit trees are picked, when the golden leaves turn brown and brittle and are swept into nature's corners by the crisp fall breezes, and when the broad and brooding harvest moon has had its boastful say, little remains of the lush summer green or the bright spring blooms. Death has deftly and smugly plied its sickle once again.

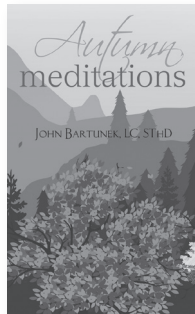
Somehow, though, the death of autumn has a sweetness to it. Its melancholy mood attracts, instead of repels. It draws us toward it. It invites us to walk with it and listen to its silent plea. Under the guise of autumn, death shows itself to be a natural companion, or—as St. Francis of Assisi famously dubbed it—our sister. Yes, things pass, death comes and steals them away, and yet we know that such is the way of this earth. Our grief is blunted by this knowledge, by this yearly tour of brown grass, bare limbs, raked lawns, and fallow fields. Here in our fallen world, death, though often unwelcome, is not a stranger. Death teaches us detachment, the hard but necessary lesson that we should not cling too strongly to anything here below, because everything earthly fades away. As the medieval monks used to put it, *sic transit*

gloria mundi, thus passes the glory of this passing world.

One of the most famous phrases in the entire Catholic liturgy comes from a preface used during the holy Mass celebrated in memory of the dearly beloved who have died. It describes death, in light of Christ's own crucifixion and resurrection, as life that has "changed not ended," and in so doing it reiterates the wisdom of Christian detachment.

It's an ancient Catholic tradition to visit a cemetery on November 2, the Day of the Dead, in order to pray for the souls who have passed on and may still be undergoing purification before their entrance into heaven. It is also a way to remind ourselves that here we have no lasting city. This week, visit a cemetery and walk prayerfully among the memorials of the dead, asking God to enlighten you with the wisdom that comes from an eternal perspective.

In the subdued sunlight of autumn, infusing the burgundy and golden brown tones of fall with the warmth of a smiling sadness, let us take the hand of our sister, Death, in whatever way she shows herself, and trust that she, too, under the irresistible wisdom of Providence, is but one more mysterious manifestation, perhaps even a beckoning invitation, of God's eternal love. ✨



Source: Adapted from *Autumn Meditations*, © 2016 Fr. John Bartunek, LC, SThD (Liguori Publications, 825637). To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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Q. *Are there any helpful resources that you recommend for a person who struggles with OCD and scrupulosity?*

A. From time to time I discover a resource that is helpful and which I'm willing to recommend. Most times, I post the name of the resource on the Scrupulous Anonymous webpage or on the Facebook account. One such resource that I have recently discovered is a very helpful podcast that is hosted by a therapist who works exclusively with OCD patients. You can access the podcast at fearpodcast.com. The topics the therapist discusses are very helpful, and he has a deep respect for the people he is trying to help.

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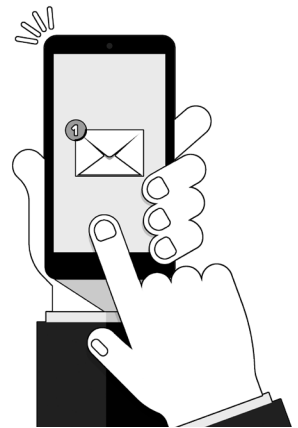


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Q. *I had a nocturnal emission and I am not sure if I fully consented to it or not. Have I committed a mortal sin because I might have enjoyed it and consented to it?*

A. No. You have no control whatsoever over the natural responses of your body. Such an occurrence has nothing to do with consent. God would not create us to have natural responses and then slam us for becoming aware of them or enjoying them. Pleasure is not a sin. Feeling good is a gift from God, not something to be denied.



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