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**Have a
Beautiful,
Terrible
Day!**

DAILY MEDITATIONS FOR THE UPS, DOWNS & IN-BETWEENS



Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!

Daily Meditations
for the Ups, Downs
& In-Betweens

Kate Bowler



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preface

These are terrible days. These are beautiful days. Somehow both realities feel inseparable in our minds now.

We have the sense that something bad might happen, and has already happened. When we read the headlines, we do not shake our heads. We nod. *Yes, we think. Of course that would happen.*

Our moods seem tight and jittery. We worry about groceries and school shootings and airborne viruses. We worry about kids and parents and friends and whether this, whatever *this* is, is all we can expect. We worry about the heart-stopping events we have already endured and what will happen next.

We worry about how we will get it all done.

We worry about everything that can never be undone.

“How are you?” people ask us.

“Anxious,” we might reply.

But when the sun begins its nightly descent, instinctively, we cast our eyes to the horizon. We have the sense that something lovely will happen, and has

already happened yesterday. We notice how the white glare of the sun behind starched clouds is pooling into oranges and deep reds, and our breath begins to slow. We nod. *Yes, we think. This is also what happens.*

Our moods thaw into awe. We marvel at good medicine, the invention of cheese dip, and the delightful mischief in our child's eye no matter how old they are. We marvel at the intricacy of flowers and the ingenuity of cities built from steel and concrete. We cannot believe how much our parents can drive us bananas and our friends can make us laugh so hard that we need to find a wall to support ourselves.

We find ourselves surrounded by the daily miracles of planets turning and stars blinking and people who hug us when we come through the door.

“How are you?” people ask us.

“Grateful,” we might reply.

We might feel awful or wonderful, but we are running out of those middle-of-the-road feelings...the more boring, humdrum feelings of being unfazed by the world around us. We are no longer able to be carried along by the momentum of ordinary days unfolding into other ordinary days. Instead, we are lifted and carried by currents larger than we are, taking us further and faster than we wanted to go. There are highs and lows, soaring views and stomach-clenching drops.

This is the new way of being in the world, the sense of unpredictably and precipitously rising and falling. We are made of feathers. We are made of stone.

What Kind of Anxiety Is This?

Why do we feel fear pricking at the edges of our minds? Why does it feel so normal to be so hypervigilant...so *aware*?

Well, there are a few varieties of fear that might be useful to name here: apocalyptic awareness, anxious awareness, and awareness of pain. And none of these emotions will be the sort of thing we bring up at parties, but we intuitively understand them to be parts of how we experience worry.

Apocalyptic Awareness

The first, apocalyptic awareness, will not be news to you. We feel afraid because—to name only a few factors—we are witnessing the increasing fragility of the structures that hold up our lives. We are seeing all the signs of our weakening democracy, the eroding environment, racial injustice, public mistrust of civic institutions, the rise of medical bankruptcy, et cetera...I could go on and on. We feel afraid because the headlines break into our days like sledgehammers.

When we start to feel like our world is teetering on the edge of the abyss, we are living with a sense of the apocalypse. *Apocalyptic* is a wonderful word because it feels the way it sounds: destructive, terrifying, catastrophic. But the word also means “that which is revealed.”

(Side note: Theologically speaking, Christians have a long, rich tradition of thinking and arguing and making predictions about the way God’s creation—the earth and everything else made by divine intent—comes to an end. E.g., Jesus returning to earth, AND SO ON. But I don’t mean *apocalyptic* in that narrow sense.)

It's also the feeling we get when we watch a documentary about rising sea levels and experience a chill. We feel like we are staring over the edge of time itself. Something happens in our minds. We pick up the thought and then want to drop it immediately because it is too impossible, too big, and too terrible to imagine. We worry that nothing we do would matter anyway. *And yet we know. We see.* We can't pull our eyes away.

Anxious Awareness

Some of us—most of us—would probably say that we know less about downright terror and more about anxiety. We wear it like a second skin. What could happen? Will it happen? We find ourselves guessing and second-guessing choices we have made. We lose more time stopping and checking our impulses than we could possibly describe, only because we would have to stop and check to think about it first. Other people seem to have a kind of natural bravado that propels them through life (which, sorry for my loud judgments here, makes them brave or stupid or wildly efficient). But that's not us.

Our thoughts have an endlessness to them: *What does that person think? What should I do? What did I do wrong? How can I keep myself safe? How can I keep others safe?* We don't know how to protect ourselves from the feeling that we are exposed somehow, open to the elements. We understand vigilance intimately. We would be naked without it.

Painful Awareness

For some of us, our relationship with fear is locked inside our own bodies and daily experiences. Many of us feel afraid because we are swimming through

physical and emotional pain—the kind of pain that threatens to wash us all away. We are immersed in the feeling of the ongoing and never-ending tragedy of our circumstances. Other people seem to belong to another world—a world where people think about dinner and chitchat about whether there will be rain or snow later on in the week. It turns out that there will always be rain or snow later on in the week, so they will keep talking. Meanwhile, we barely have language at all.

We lose the ability to arrange and rearrange thoughts that could make sense of what is happening to us and why. We would run, but where would we go? It's happening inside of us or to us.

We try crying, we try talking, we try silence. We try sleeping, we try screaming, we try telling a friend. We eat ourselves sick. We starve ourselves empty. Nothing works entirely. Everything works a little. The claustrophobia of this tragedy is suffocating. But then during the stray moments, we forget. The normalcy we glimpse feels like a delusion. *What is more real than this pain? What is truer about me than this?*

Living in the Beautiful, Terrible

Something you should know about me: I wrote this particular book now because I am in the midst of a dark season of pain. I have physical pain that ripples down my back and pelvis, up and down my legs, and crawls up my neck. It feels cold and loud. It feels like lightning delivered intravenously, washing over me in waves.

I almost never talk about it, because I find pain difficult to describe and even more difficult to describe over and over again to people who love me and cannot help me. (I am not recommending this kind of inwardness, only

confessing that I haven't figured out another way.) So, rightly or wrongly, I don't talk about pain, but I think about it on a thirty-second loop. Driving, scrubbing dishes, doing laundry, talking to friends, taking meetings, answering email, talking on the phone. Some days the pain is so deafening that I forget what room I'm in. People are talking and I can't quite make out the words. I worry that the look on my face will give away how far I have drifted from where they can reach me. I am lost to myself, given over to a body that is deeply indifferent about what I put on the calendar.

But I discovered that for roughly an hour first thing in the morning, my brain was bright and clear. So I wrote these blessings and reflections. It was all I could do. I couldn't research long-term history books (as I am often doing). I couldn't write long-form stories because that, friends, takes hours and hours and I had only a short burst before my ability to think detonated. But I could say:

God, whatever is true about you had better be true now.

Today.

I could not wait until tomorrow to have long, luxurious thoughts about the Christian past and some hypothetically wonderful person I might become if I could only get my act together. Instead, if I wanted to pray or bless this day, I needed to be able to place my faith alongside my reality. And my reality is fear, pain, and fear of pain.

If you are anxious or worried about whether your life can also be beautiful, welcome. Me too. Thank you for joining me here. I can't tell you how nice it is to have company when, otherwise, I would assume the social media lie that everyone is living a spectacular and effortless life drinking green smoothies somewhere, doing beachfront yoga or noodling around Europe, is true.

What I want more than anything is to bless you and me right now, and feel the truth of our realities without letting reality itself overwhelm us. People often say, “FAITH NOT FEAR,” as if faithful people can’t be afraid. But we are afraid for so many reasons, many of them both reasonable and realistic. So let’s just settle that controversy now: we can be faithful and afraid at the same time.

Awareness Is Your Gift

Let’s try talking about faith and fear in the same breath. Oooohhh, this feels a little spicy but I’m going to argue it anyway. I want to suggest that being a Christian *encourages us* to understand fear in a more intimate way.

Let me tell you a story about roofs. And about why we know something good about faith and fear and love and Christianity, maybe because of them.

I was twenty-five. It was in the cowboy days of subprime mortgage lending, and a bank was dumb enough to give me, a graduate student in religion, enough money to purchase a bungalow in Durham, North Carolina. My husband and I had recently moved to the United States from Canada, so our credit scores were purely hypothetical, and the hilariously small stipend that I received for teaching, researching, and correctly pronouncing Kierkegaard’s name to my classmates (no, look, it’s really more like Kierkegore) furnished us with a lot of stories in the years to come about the time we got vitamin deficiencies and all the skin on my husband’s hands inexplicably peeled off. But we had a house we couldn’t afford, which was still a treat, and the previous owner had left a bright green mini-golf carpet in the living room, and an entire Elvis Presley tribute room in what later became our guest room.

There was a shed in the backyard with all kinds of promise—a simple peaked structure, two floors high, and lined with thick white oak. It had been a carpenter’s workshop for the owner who had built the main house and who had even bothered to line the edges of the property with elegant masonry quarried from the same bluish gray stone that made my school, Duke University, look like Duke University. But the problem with the shed was the crater where the roof had sunk so low that termites and wet wood were threatening to pull the whole thing down. We tried to prop it up as best we could—beams here, brackets there—but the only real solution would be a religious one.

I have always believed that one of the great arguments for being part of a collectivist Christian tradition—three cheers for Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and Anabaptists of all kinds—is their willingness to do voluntary, grueling manual labor and call it love. And we would need a lot of love. So our Mennonite family drove the thirty-seven hours from their prairie homes in Canada and took residence in the King of Rock and Roll’s Memorial Room (as we had begun to call the guest room). They used reciprocating saws for most of the day until their biceps burned and not much of the original building was left. Then they measured new wood and we bought a nail gun, and sometimes, at night, I would wake up to find my husband flicking me in the head in his sleep because his hand, the nail gun, had a lot of work left to do.

That year the star of the Christmas letter was the shed, with a few addenda to make clear that it should last another twenty-five years before it caved in again on account of the limited warranty on the shingles. I thought about this often when I would sit in the yard, watching the same people show up to build me a fence because I had recently received a sudden Stage IV cancer diagnosis and there was nothing else to do. I wondered about the shed, which would almost certainly outlive me now, and how all my plans (oh, my lovely plans) had been stripped down to the studs.

If you asked me before the cancer, before the years of treatment and stacks of medical bills, I would have told you almost nothing about fear or anxiety or the headlines of the newspaper. I would have told you, one way or another, that I don't need to be terribly afraid because *I am a sure thing. I'm a great bet. Look at me, quieting fear with my tidy individualism and my store-bought solutions.* Fear is for people, other people, who can't ensure their own future.

Human lives really do seem like very sensible projects when you initially add them up. A golden anniversary is fifty years and possibly two kids and three furnaces. A retirement home for your parents is at least another monthly mortgage payment for a decade, but you can probably budget correctly if you imagine finally paying off your student loans. And then taking out another. We add and subtract for radiators and replacement cars and when the dishwasher vomits all the soapy, dirty water onto the hardwood floor (but only when we are on vacation). We don't feel lucky, but we are.

What I had not learned from my shed caving in in the first place was what Simone de Beauvoir calls our "facticity." All of our freedoms—our choices and our ridiculous attempts to plan our lives—are constrained by so many unchangeable details. I was born in this particular year to those parents in this town. This medication exists and that treatment doesn't, but now it seems that all along I had these cancer cells in my colon, spreading to my liver, and scattered in my abdomen because of a genetic blueprint written long ago.

This existential state is, to borrow a term from Martin Heidegger, the *thrownness* of human life. As we wake to the suffering of this world and our own existence, we find ourselves hurtling through time. We reach out for something, anything, to steady us, but we are like astronauts untethered. That is a particular kind of grief—the awareness that we are not drivers of our circumstances, not anymore. We are unwilling passengers.

Willing to Be Carried

American culture values choice above all. People who choose are masters of their own destiny. They are the greatest of all mythical creatures: self-made. By contrast, people with fewer choices—less independence, more dependence—might begin to feel the sting of a distinct kind of shame. We might wonder if our awareness of our limitations is a sign of our failures. After all, we have failed to render ourselves invincible and carry our own weight. We stumbled and did not always recover; we took and could not always give.

Even at my most durable, I should have seen that it took so many people to build my life, prop it up, and maintain it. But once I was sick, I came to realize that a failure to live life on my own is not a failure at all.

The hard truth is that the most basic aspect of our humanity is not our determination, our talents, or whatever we accomplished during last year's resolutions. We are united by our fragility. We all need shelter because we are soft and mushy and irritable in the elements—and we will need so much more than a bank loan because, sooner or later, we are left exposed. Time and chance, says the author of Ecclesiastes, happen to us all.

Honestly, none of us can afford the lives we already have. We set out to build our own dreams, slay our own dragons, and pay our own taxes, and find that we trip over our health and our marriages and the way our inboxes suck us into the void. We were promised that American individualism and a multibillion-dollar self-help industry would set us on our feet. When North Americans look for answers to our dependence, we often turn to the easy promises of the gospel of self-help: "Try harder!" "Change your mindset." "You are your greatest hope." So we bought cheap paperbacks in a frenzy to find a cure for being human.

But soon our own limitations—and the weakness of our institutions—showed us the absurdity of this kind of individualism. (It was the atomism that French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville, that early astute observer of American culture, warned us about.) Our dreams turned out to be built from toothpicks, each person propped up to stand entirely alone.

We understand instinctively that we cannot win this game of solitaire. Our churches and book clubs, bible studies, farmers' markets, and our carpools and sports teams offer little reminders that we should need each other, borrow and lend money, babysit and run an errand, argue and debate.

“Absolute independence is a false ideal,” argued the sociologist Robert Bellah, whose deep understanding of the invention of the modern self rarely missed the mark. “It delivers not the autonomy it promises but loneliness and vulnerability instead.”

But we usually see this only when we have sunk to the very bottom. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber described how she understood the truth of interdependence most fully when she began practicing the uncomfortable honesty demanded by Alcoholics Anonymous.

“Recovery is hard to do on your own,” she observed. “You have to do it with a group of other people who are messed up in the same way but have found some light in their darkness. Sitting in those rooms in twelve-step meetings, there’s a particular kind of hope that only comes from being in the midst of people who have really suffered—suffered at their own hand—who can be completely and totally honest about that.”

Her group nicknamed this sort of community “The Rowing Club.” They would have to take turns pulling on the oar. At times, each would have to be willing to be carried.

A Delightfully Christian Word: Precarity

There is an absolutely spot-on word to describe this way of being in the world, its fragility, its dependence. And I would be delighted if you began to use it in your daily life and especially at work events. That word is *precarity*.

The English word *precarity* means a state of dangerous uncertainty, but its Latin root tells us a good deal more about its Christian character. The term comes from *precarious* or “obtained by entreaty or prayer”—a state where we cannot achieve things by ourselves. We must rely on someone else, God or neighbor.

So instead of saying that we are self-mastering winners, beautiful cyborgs who can somehow rule our worlds by our own determination, we can admit truths that are much more realistic. How are we? Dependent. How are we doing? Fine until we need help (which will be in roughly two or three minutes).

This understanding offers us a more comfortable relationship between our faith and our fear. Our fear is an awareness of the world and our place in it. And what are we? Fragile.

There is a wonderful, saintly Catholic woman you should get to know if you haven't already; her name is Dorothy Day. She lived in New York City in the slums with people who couldn't afford adequate food and shelter. One day she received a letter from a priest from the Caribbean island of Martinique describing his own work with the poor, and the letter was quite pointed about what it would mean for all those of us wanting stable roofs.

He wrote: “Here we want precarity in everything except the church.” In other words, we talk a good game about wanting to be people who love what God

loves until it requires that we begin to accept anxiety and fear as part of the life of faith. The priest went on to say that recently the place where they were handing out food was nearly collapsing and they had tried to prop it up with several supplemental poles. But it would last maybe only two or three more years. “Someday it will fall on our heads and that will be funny,” he said drily. But he couldn’t bring himself to stop feeding people in the breadlines in order to be another kind of church, the kind that was “always building, enlarging, and embellishing.” We have no right to, he concluded. No right, I suppose he meant, to demand security afforded to no one else.

As Christians we must nod our heads and shrug our shoulders when we’re told, in no uncertain terms, that there are no lifetime warranties.

Our Delicate Selves

There is a tremendous opportunity here, now, for us to develop language and foster community around empathy, courage, and hope in the midst of this fear of our own vulnerability. Our neighbors are expressing an aching desire to feel less alone, needing language for the pain they’ve experienced, searching for meaning and someone to tell them the truth. They are hungry for honesty in the age of shellacked social media influencers. They are desperate for a thicker kind of hope that can withstand their circumstances and embolden them to preach the truth of our resurrected Lord, whose future kingdom will have no tears and no pain and no Instagram at all.

We have a few good clues that we are allowed to hope for this kind of interreliance here, now. There’s a strange story in the gospel of Luke about friends who bring one of their own to see Jesus. Their Rowing Club was a man down, so they carried him to where Jesus was preaching in the hope that he could be healed from his paralysis. But the crowds were thick and the