




Gem Fadling

Hold   
That   
  
Thought

Sorting Through the  
Voices in Our Heads



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# You Are More Than Your Thoughts

**“IT SOUNDS TO ME LIKE YOU HAD AN ANXIETY ATTACK.”**

“What? I can’t experience an anxiety attack. I run an organization called Unhurried Living. This is really off brand,” I thought to myself, tongue in cheek. “How did this happen?”

Here’s the thing . . . I already knew what triggered it. I just couldn’t get it to stop.

## **TRIGGERS AND MY THOUGHT LIFE**

A few years prior, we had launched our own non-profit, Unhurried Living. It had been a wonderful experience and yet the same dynamics that make it amazing, also make it stressful—building something from scratch, discerning how best to serve, creating continuous inspirational content, training, teaching, and travel. I love every part of what I do. But as we were building our organization, I experienced recurring run-ins with my newfound ambition and an anxious straining. These bouts of anxiety would build up and about once a year, I would hit a wall. I would continue to work but

inside, the car was running out of gas and the type of fuel changed without notice. My body would speak up (usually through exhaustion), and I would make necessary adjustments in my thinking and in the *way* I was working.

To be clear, I was, in fact, drinking my own unhurried Kool-Aid: I was practicing the things we teach people through Unhurried Living and had done so for years. And yet there was still something about the way I was (or wasn't) managing my anxiety and stress that began to take a toll. The fourth yearly occurrence of this pressure ended up being more than I could handle with my regular patterns. Looking back, I now see that the unaddressed voices of the Stressed Achiever and the Inner Critic were wreaking havoc.

At the time, we were talking with a consultant about a new program we were going to launch along with the marketing efforts surrounding it. Before I knew it, this conversation triggered<sup>1</sup> me, and I descended into a spiral of anxiety. We were rolling along just fine until the consultant mentioned the timeline: the new program would begin in just one month. In his mind, the timing made sense because we would be riding the wake of another offering. But hearing that date sent shock waves through my body.

*You're not ready.*

*You'll never keep up.*

*What are you thinking? You can't do this.*

*There isn't enough time.*

*What if it doesn't work?*

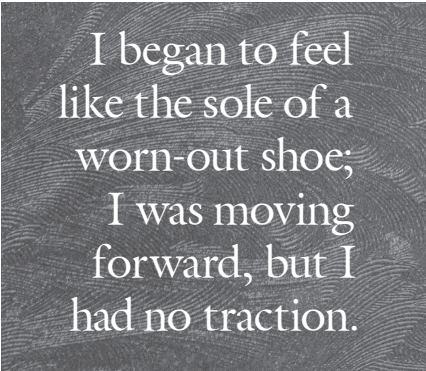
These were just some of the thoughts that comingled with my adrenaline and sent me into fight or flight mode. This became the handle that turned on the flow of anxiety. These thoughts flooded in like a raging river, I accepted them as my own, and I became overwhelmed at the idea of beginning a new aspect of

our work. Undiscerned thoughts will often do this. Rather than leaving our thoughts unexamined, it is better to engage the Inner Observer, that aspect of ourselves that can step back from the subjectivity of the moment.<sup>2</sup> The Inner Observer is a non-biased aspect that can help us, along with the Holy Spirit, to take time to notice, discern, and respond. I had become acquainted with my Inner Observer many years before but, for some reason, she took the day off, and I was swept away by the roaring rapids of anxiety.

Even with my regular spiritual practices, I was unable to manage the level of stress I was feeling. I continued to push, and, at the same time, I didn't pause to process the anxiety in my emotions or my body. Unconscious drives kept the spigot turned on. So, I called my former counselor for a checkup.

I would find out later from my counselor that I was experiencing the pulsating release of adrenaline, and thankfully he helped me learn how to manage this dynamic. Normally, once adrenaline is released, it washes through. However, I felt the heightened sensations in my body and then added lots of unhelpful thoughts that culminated in ongoing, anxiety-producing aftershocks. For a few weeks, I was on high alert all day, every day. I began to feel like the sole of a worn-out shoe; I was moving forward, but I had no traction.

In addition, I knew I would need a refreshed re-working of my thoughts as they sent me into the ongoing, unrelenting, pulsing waves of anxiety. I was being invited to dig down even deeper into the well to find new levels of some much-needed freedom.



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## A REFRESHED FOUNDATION

A Tuscan vacation had long been a dream of mine. I'd seen the romantic movies and the Rick Steves documentaries of rolling hillsides and views for miles. I thought it would be the perfect way to celebrate our thirty-fourth wedding anniversary. We had not been on a real vacation for a few years, the kind that was dreamed of, planned for, and set aside as a sacred unplugging. Many of our recent vacations consisted of a few days added on to work trips, so we were way overdue for this kind of rest and replenishment.

Because of my husband, Alan's, international travels for the previous few years, we had saved up a nice stock of miles. So, I began my research by talking to friends who had been to Italy and re-engaged Rick's videos to get the lay of the land. After carefully choosing, editing, and pruning our list, we came up with the perfect trip. The bulk of the two weeks would be spent in Tuscany, with a little Barcelona, Spain, added onto the end of the trip for good measure.

With my anxiety attack just a couple of months prior, I was intent on our getaway being more like a pilgrimage than a vacation. I entered our European anniversary trip with a single prayer: *God, you have to show me a new way to live and work. My current way is no longer serving me, and I need a new level of sustainability and peace.*

For our first full day in Florence, we made a reservation to climb to the top of the Duomo in the Cathedral. Four hundred and sixty-three steps to the top with multiple dark, concrete, spiral staircases going up, up, up. The climb to the top of the Duomo was long and arduous, sometimes feeling claustrophobic. Jet lag had left me without much stamina, and much of the time I was winded. There was one distinct moment when I didn't know if I could keep going

as the walls pressed in tightly around me. *Was it going to get more closed in? Could I hang in there all the way to the top?* This was evidently the price you pay for a staggering view and perspective—literally and metaphorically.

With quad muscles quaking, I finally made it to the top of the Florence Cathedral. Relieved, I began my quiet stroll around the three-hundred-sixty-degree dome, pausing here and there to look out over the city. I found myself searching for exhilaration. I was trying to feel something. Anything. Some sparkly sensation of *I'm doing something amazing right now!* But as I searched within, all I sensed was flat numbness where I expected excitement to be. Experiencing part jet lag, part exertion from the stair climb, and part exhaustion from the previous months of anxiety, I stared out over the rooftops.

Slowly, and invited by the Spirit, my search for excitement turned into a prayer of gratitude. I moved from anticipation to contentment through gratitude in the moment. I enjoyed the softness, the quietness, of this inner shift, and I whispered, “Thank you.” I took a deep breath as a soft smile emerged.

After climbing the Duomo, I took time to wander the Cathedral. I sat down in the side chapel that contained the bread for Eucharist. Behind the ciborium (the container designed to hold the eucharistic bread), there was a large painting of *The Last Supper*. For the first time in a long while, I finally felt like myself. Just me. Sitting. Being.

As I stared at the ciborium, in my mind I heard the phrase I hear every week during Eucharist: *This is my body, given for you*. It was followed by this pointed invitation: *Stop pushing. Stop trying. Stop angsting.*

These were the perfect words for my situation and the spiritual counsel I so desperately needed. I willingly received this message. This unholy trio was exactly what I experienced, and it no longer served me in any way. The time on that pew was quite relaxing and peaceful. My heart and mind were now open to God anew. My prayer for a new way was already being answered.

### **YOU ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS**

*You are not your thoughts.* The first time I heard this wisdom from the desert fathers and mothers, I was stumped. These are my words, my commentary, and my voice. Of course, my thoughts are me. But even though I barely understood what it meant at the time, something about this insight rang true. Another way to say this in the positive is, *you are more than your thoughts.* As I began to take in this reality, a huge sheet of glacial ice slid from the mountain of my understanding about what goes on inside my own head.

At the onset of a triggering event, I easily move into a series of thoughts. The Anxious Controller joins in chorus with the Inner Critic, and these thoughts (which we will identify synonymously as “voices”) lead to unhelpful emotions. Before I know it, I’m on an unwilling slide into pushing, trying, or angsting. But I am not my thoughts; that voice I hear is not necessarily my truest self; and I do, in fact, have a choice about my response.

Of course, by now, many of us have a rudimentary understanding of what is occurring in our brains because of the developments in the field of neuroscience. We have learned, with great delight, that we can change our brains. Neuroplasticity shows the patterns that have formed can be renewed. We no longer believe in being stuck. We can pick up the needle and move it into a new groove, one that we create with new thoughts! Sounds simple, but



it is far from easy. It takes a great amount of courage and effort to become open to change, aware of your thoughts, and willing to do something about them.

Romans 12:2 says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This is a beautiful invitation to engage thought work. And yet it is in the passive: “Be transformed.” We are reminded to cooperate with God’s work of making all things new within us. Engagement with this transforming process is much more fruitful than heeding the advice of the Positive Thinker, who isn’t always grounded in reality, or the Passive Spectator, who prefers to play it safe. I needed to engage a new way of thinking so I wouldn’t fall prey to stress the same way in the future. I carried my prayer for help all the way to Italy, and God met me there.

### **PUSHING, TRYING, AND ANGSTING**

I was invited to stop pushing, trying, and angsting. But what does this mean? How do these dynamics show up in my life, and why are they so unhelpful? Let’s take a look at these particular dynamics that heightened my anxiety and were named by the Spirit in the Florence Cathedral.

***Stop pushing.*** Pushing is what we do when we want to have a sense of control. We know that controlling others and circumstances is an illusion and yet we still try. We aren’t happy to let the ball roll down the hill and so we find ways to move against it, pushing it upward by sheer might. This is exhausting and, if left unchecked, is a straight line toward meltdowns or burnout. I had succumbed to pushing when I unconsciously gave way to the false belief that *I am what I do*.<sup>3</sup> The multi-faceted nature of my work easily led to overwhelm. This caused me to search for ways to control my environment. And when on a quest for control,

perfectionism slides easily into place. Perfectionism is a terrible master because it demands 110 percent, and it has no tolerance for subpar work. You can see how pushing emerges as a natural result of this. I . . . must . . . do . . . more . . . to . . . be . . . more. These unhelpful thoughts emerge when pushing: *You've got to manage this. You can't let anything slide. You've got to defend yourself or this will leave your control. Keep doing something!* Even if you don't consciously see these thoughts, you can usually feel them in your body and the need to push grows stronger.

The desire for power and control<sup>4</sup> that leads to pushing shows up in Thomas Keating's programs for happiness (power/control, affection/esteem, and security/safety). There is nothing wrong with them and these instincts are necessary for human development. They are built in so humans can survive and thrive. And yet, as we continue to make our way forward, we'll see that many of our unhelpful thoughts find their genesis in our search for fulfilling one or more of these unconscious drives in an unhealthy way.

Pushing occurs when the desire for power and control goes unchecked. But when I pause and remember that *I already have what I need*, I realize I need not *do* more to *be* more, and I don't have to keep pushing that ball up the hill. I can relax into the situation and pushing can take a rest.

***Stop trying.*** Trying is what we do when we want to have a sense of value. As my identity became more wrapped up in my work, I often looked outward for affirmation. This type of trying is like rowing a boat to an unknown and likely unreachable destination. It is unreachable because the affirmation monster is never fully satisfied. How much more encouragement do you need to stay afloat? Just a little more. The thoughts that came up for me were: *What*

*will people think? What if I look or sound stupid? I need a large following to validate what I'm doing. I can't offend anyone. What if people don't like me?*

Trying is what emerges when I give in to the unconscious belief that *I am what others say about me*.<sup>5</sup> I continue rowing to receive other people's approval, accolades, and affirmation instead of rowing for pleasure or out of my giftedness. The kind of exhaustion this causes is more emotional and mental than physical. It comes from the deep desire for esteem and affection.<sup>6</sup> Aiming to please others is another unruly taskmaster because it leaves you at the whim of other people's behavior and expectations. You end up being on the end of other people's chains and if they don't rattle them just the way you want, it can lead to more distress. And so, you continue to try.

As I pause and remember that *I already have what I need*, I can lay down the oars and begin to float on the ocean of God's love. I remember I am already loved exactly as I am, and the drive to try diminishes.

***Stop angsting.*** Angsting is what emerges when we want to have a sense of safety. When we don't feel safe, anxiety and worry combine to create a sense of angst. The thing about angst is that it is unfocused, and it manifests like a generalized blanket of dread. It hovers so that you don't really notice it or name it, you just feel the weight of it. It's like carrying around a heavy, wet woolen blanket draped over your shoulders. This was the sensation I began to feel as my anxieties revved up. Thoughts like these would float by and overwhelm me: *This is too much. You can't keep up with this. What have you gotten yourself into?* Undiscerned, these thoughts lead to a foreboding sense that something horrible could occur at any moment.

Angsting is a search for security and safety<sup>7</sup> and the false identity of *I am what I have*.<sup>8</sup> I believe it is the stuff around me—whether material, relational, or emotional—that will keep me safe. For some, this creates a surrounding flurry as they seek more and more stimuli to keep these voices at bay. Others, and maybe most of us, turn to numbing. Angsting can be an overwhelming sensation so sometimes we suppress the anxious feelings and move toward whatever takes the pain away. The easy ones are substances, food, and media. But numbing can occur in any number of possible ways, including diving into unhealthy relationships or mindless shopping. The list could go on. In fact, numbing occurs when we are doing anything to escape our actual life, our reality.

When I pause and remember that *I already have what I need* I can finally take off that dense wet blanket of angst and relax into the love of God. I begin to experience Jesus as the Prince of Peace, and I realize I can learn to cope with my life with greater ease.

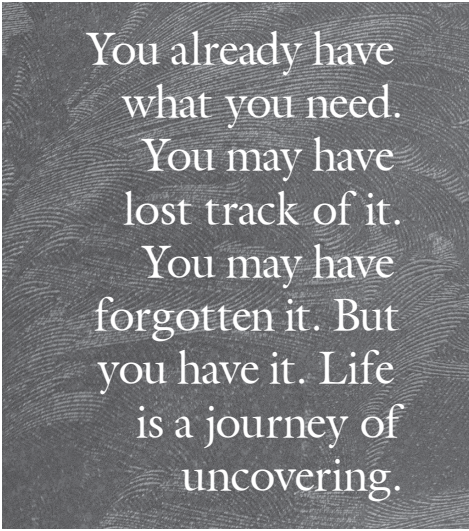
## **YOU ALREADY HAVE WHAT YOU NEED**

After a couple of days in Florence, we drove to Assisi. Having no idea what was in store for us, Assisi would quickly become one of our new favorite locations. As in Florence, we took time to meander the Basilica of Saint Francis. By this time, we were a few days into our vacation, and I easily walked at a strolling pace. I wandered one of the enclaves of the basilica, still carrying with me a prayer for a refreshed way to live and work. As I moved through the large space, in my heart I sensed the Holy Spirit saying: *You already have what you need. You may have lost track of it. You may have forgotten it. But you have it. Life is a journey of uncovering.*

Our vision of God matters a great deal here. God is not a distant, stoic entity whose location is out beyond the reach of the Hubble

Space Telescope. We are not trying to pull God close so that he can see and hear us. We are not banging on a locked door trying to get God interested in what we are doing. Cognitively, we would all likely agree that this is the case. And yet we don't always *feel* it is true. I held onto this image for a long time. God was some distant old man that I would have to coerce to come my way. I wouldn't have said this out loud because it was more of an underlying feeling than a conscious thought.

When we talk about the love of God, it is more like you are sinking into something—or rather someone—who is already right there. In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard wrote, “But do we actually believe this? I mean, are we ready automatically to act as if we stand here and now and always in the presence of



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the great being . . . who fills and overflows all space, including the atmosphere around our body?”<sup>9</sup> This description was a major shift for me, and I came to refer to this idea as, *God is not elsewhere*. It's another way of saying, “God is near” but the twist of “not elsewhere” shines a light on my former belief and turns it on its head. When I say this out loud, it helps me to remember that God is right here, the very air I am breathing. This is the heartbeat of Acts 17:28, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

Contemplative practitioner and clinical psychologist Dr. James Finley, on his *Turning to the Mystics* podcast, said it like this:

And if love is the fullness of presence, then just one thing is happening, this love is pouring itself out and giving itself away, see, that we are the song that God sings. And this is so radical that if God were to cease loving us into the present moment, at the count of three, we'd disappear, because we are nothing, absolutely nothing, apart from the love of God.<sup>10</sup>

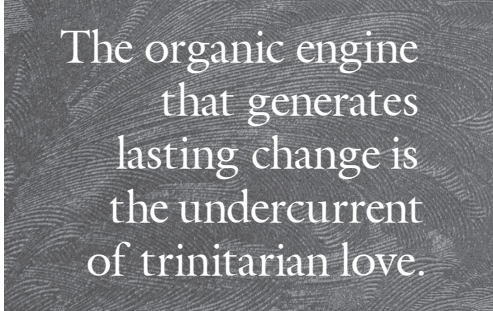
*God is not elsewhere.* Becoming more settled into this reality is the key to everything. You are not alone. No matter what you are going through. God is present and you are being held together by love. This is at the heart of my Assisi insight: *You already have what you need.*

Pushing, trying, and angsting are red lights on the dashboard that remind me to pause and check in with myself. As I engage a self-check, I can begin to embrace the idea that I already have what I need, I can open my heart more fully to love. It is love that sustains me inwardly, so I won't be owned by Nouwen's false identities or Keating's programs for happiness. Even a brief pause can give you some space to re-orient yourself to the truth. You can learn to breathe into the situation, allowing the dynamics of pushing, trying, or angsting to relax.

You will find that 2 Corinthians 13:14 contains a blessing that speaks directly to our desire to be embraced by the Trinity: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." The Trinity lives in a perfect union of love. As much as we are invited to notice our thoughts, we are also graciously being wooed into the trinitarian embrace. This is the heartbeat of *you already have what you need.* And just outside that inner circle lies this truth: "His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness,

through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Peter 1:3 NASB).

It is the love of God, the grace of Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that empowers us from within. If we stay in our heads by focusing only on our thoughts and narratives, our inner work may soon become hollow and lifeless. The organic engine that generates lasting change is the undercurrent of trinitarian love. This means everything you *need* access to, you *have* access to. This requires receptivity and an acceptance of process. There may be layers on top of layers that require uncovering before we can experience the fullness of this verse. But the pursuit is part of it. Let’s look at the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit as we continue to be more open, aware, and willing to receive their love.



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***The love of God.*** In Matthew 3:16-17 we find that as Jesus was being baptized, a voice was heard from heaven: “This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Built into this sentence is unconditional love and acceptance.

In a spirit of prayer, let’s personalize this sentence using the feminine, and feel free to read these words aloud: “This is my daughter, whom I love; with her I am well pleased.” How does that feel?

Now, slightly more personal, I’ll use my name (feel free to insert your own): “This is Gem, whom I love; with her I am well pleased.”

Finally, hear God saying this to you in the first person: “Gem, I love you; you are so pleasing to me.”

When I find myself pushing, I can pause to hear God call me his daughter. *You are my daughter.* This sense of family care can calm

my need to manage and control. When I'm trying, I can hear God speak of his love for me. *Whom I love*. This love can quell my need to look everywhere else for esteem or value. When I'm angsting, I can hear God's affirmation. *With you I am well pleased*. This love can relax my anxious heart, and I remember I am always perfectly safe in the kingdom of God.

***The grace of Jesus.*** Each Sunday in my Anglican church as the bread is held up before me, the priest utters these beautiful words: "This is the body of Christ, given for you." It is this phrase that Jesus offered to me in the Florence Cathedral: *This is my body, given for you*. Each word speaks beautifully of love and swims in grace. When I'm pushing, I can remember that Jesus *gave* his very life, his body, for me. When I am trying, I can remember that Jesus gave *himself* willingly, a gift. When I am angsting, I can remember that Jesus gave himself *for me*. My body. Given. For you.

***The fellowship of the Spirit.*** In the upper room, Jesus reminded the disciples that he and the Father would not abandon them but would leave a helper, the Spirit. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16-17). Jesus continues in verse 26: "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

When I'm pushing, I can remember that the Spirit promises to teach and *remind me* of everything Jesus has said. When I'm trying, I can remember that the Spirit will indeed *help me*. I am not alone. Ever. When I'm angsting, I can remember that the Spirit will *be with me* forever. Embracing eternity can surely talk me off the ledge of my anxieties.



The love of the Father. The grace of Jesus. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian love is the foundation on which we build our thought work. And we can work on both concurrently. We don't have to put anything off. We simply take our next step on the path of love as well as the highway of our thoughts.

### PERSONIFICATION OF VOICES

In the animated Disney movie *Inside Out*, emotions such as joy, sadness, and anger were personified so we could look at them objectively. We were invited to hear from them and learn about ourselves and others. In a similar way, I'd like to personify some of the voices we have in our heads so that we can detach a bit and see them from a distance. In this way, we may be able to engage our Inner Observer and gain a little more insight into the monologues, dialogues, and diatribes that float through our brains on any given day.

There are some voices that do not simply drift through; they are more deeply ingrained. So much so that we make the mistake of thinking that the voices and thoughts are, in fact, us. But, as we were reminded from classic spirituality, we are not our thoughts, we *have* thoughts. These inner voices are thoughts, and we can learn to notice, discern, and respond to them. I have chosen a few common inner voices and have given them names so that we can take a more objective look at each one. We are influenced by these voices, and yet we have the power to befriend, integrate, and release much of the angst that comes from allowing them to take the driver's seat.

Each of these inner voices can become our teachers as we learn to listen to them. But we must remain in the driver's seat of our own lives. We decide which thoughts to focus on and what we do

once we've noticed what is being said. This path toward maturity takes practice. We won't get it perfect, but we can make tremendous progress in our ability not to be taken captive by fearful or controlling inner voices. There is no need to judge any of these voices. This adds to their shame, and they devolve into the worst form of themselves as they go unseen, unheard, and unacknowledged. It is our acknowledgment of them that liberates us to experience a more full, rich, and free life. If we do not look the voices squarely in the eye, we might remain trapped in unhelpful and unhealthy ways.

At its core, each voice does not believe it already has what it needs. So, it finds a way to whisper (or yell) in your ear to get your attention. When faced with the truth *you already have what you need*, the voices may lash out:

*No, you don't. You don't have enough control. What if things go awry? What will happen then, huh?!*

*No, you don't. You haven't achieved enough yet. You haven't proved yourself. Get on it!*

*No, you don't. You can't possibly have everything yet. But I know how to get it. Let's go!*

*No, you don't. It's not perfect yet. We are going to get this right if it's the last thing we do.*

*No, you don't. That other person is keeping you from being happy. If they would just change, then you'd have what you need. Until then you are stuck.*

*No, you don't. And you don't know how to get it. You only have so much energy and we've got more important things to do like hide, be scared, and remain unfulfilled. That way you never have to be disappointed.*

*No, you don't. How could you possibly fill that giant void in your heart? There is no way to fill up this space, and even if you try there's no way it will happen any time soon.*

Seeing the voices this starkly can make us either laugh or cry. But when these unhelpful thoughts circle around in our brain, they seem very real—and they feel like the truth. After I chose these seven voices and began to unpack them, I realized many of them have managing tendencies found in internal family systems (IFS).<sup>11</sup> It makes sense that these energies would emerge because pushing, trying, and angsting easily leads to a manager-type dynamic. IFS refers to our different “parts” that arise to help us along the way. These parts rise up over the course of our lives—including traumatic experiences—and they do help us cope. However, each part may become increasingly unhelpful as they keep us stuck in patterns that no longer serve us. Ideally, we can learn to befriend these parts and let them know that our adult, maturing self can take it from here.

As a reminder, I am not coming at this from a therapeutic frame because I am not a therapist. I am coming alongside you as a spiritual director and a soul care coach. We'll take a look at a handful of ways we try to manage ourselves, our relationships, and our responsibilities. These voices may appear to us as thoughts, feelings, or intuitions. They are not an exhaustive list of every dynamic or inner voice. They are a handful of ways we can grow in awareness of our various parts. Together, we can learn to identify these seven voices and any others that arise. And we can notice, discern, and respond our way to greater wholeness.

In the next chapter, we'll look at making necessary choices, engaging our whole self, and choosing fruitful action. I'll also introduce an important practice—Notice, Discern, and Respond—as we take a deep dive into each of the seven voices. Thank you

for investing in yourself by being willing to engage your own thoughts as well as God's love. I pray you'll find the freedom you are looking for.

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### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In what area(s) of your life do you notice a tendency for pushing, trying, or angsting?
- What does it mean to you that *God is not elsewhere*?
- How aware are you of your own Inner Observer? How might you engage your Inner Observer more often?
- With which unbelief objection did you resonate most?

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