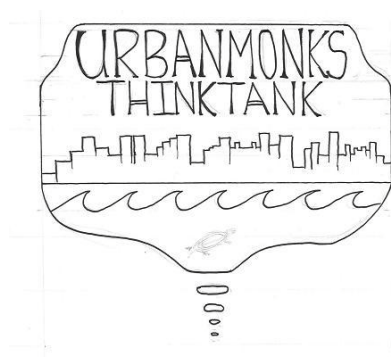


The Weather of the Mind



**Urbanmonks Wisdom Curriculum
Book One**

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“And it never failed that during the dry years
the people forgot about the rich years,
and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years.”
– John Steinbeck, East of Eden

“By three methods we may learn wisdom:
first, by reflection, which is noblest;
second, by imitation, which is easiest;
and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”
- Confucius

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Introduction

I propose that wisdom ought to be a course of life-long study for us all. Wisdom ought to be a subject for exploration and discussion in our families, in our relationships, in our neighborhoods, and in our schools.

In this book, I introduce the Urbanmonks Wisdom Curriculum, explain various methods for studying wisdom, and then share some simple yet potent rituals for identifying and understanding the weather of our minds and for building strategies for our response.

I have been researching emotional health and culture for a dozen years and I have realized that the topic of our emotions is somewhat challenging to write about. For we are not a culture that likes to go deep and explore the nature of our lives. However, it seems that each year more of us realize that we must go deeper. We realize that we must understand our emotional selves in order to build a healthy life. We are beginning to see emotional health in a way that is similar to physical health. Just like we need to eat well and exercise to build healthy muscles and bones, we must learn to listen to and understand our emotions to build healthy minds.

For many of us, understanding our emotions is no longer a luxury, no longer a choice we have. Many of us have been forced to retreat. Many of us have, at some point in our lives, hit the wall, emotionally. And these wall-hitting episodes are the most defining moments of our lives. These are the great crossroads of our emotional lives. At these junctures we face a critical choice: to distract or to learn. Many want to learn but

are overwhelmed and then seek out distraction. This book is intended to provide a set of skills that can allow us to learn from life's inevitable challenges.

In the same way that hearing a weather report for afternoon thundershowers can help us plan properly, learning about the weather of our minds is particularly valuable when we must deal with the inevitable rough storms of our lives. We use measuring devices – thermometers, speedometers, and clocks – every day and these help us understand the situation and allow us to respond quickly and effectively. And yet, we have developed no gauges for rapidly assessing our emotional health.

Imagine if our fire department did not have a method for rapidly assessing a fire. Imagine they didn't have a practiced response for each challenge they faced. Imagine if every time there was a fire they spent a half hour trying to understand what was going on and then another half hour making a game plan for how to respond. That would be insane. Yet, this is how we approach our emotional challenges. Most of us don't have a great sense of how to assess our internal challenges, our internal fires, and when we try to figure out a strategy from within the fire we are often not seeing things clearly.

The Weather of the Mind is intended to help us learn how to more readily assess our emotional state and to have a basic plan of how to respond when the challenges are greatest.

Studying Wisdom

I began to study wisdom in search of a solution, a solution to the high rates of anxiety, depression, and addiction in our culture. We did already have some solutions, but these were reactive, after-the-fact solutions. I found myself wondering, where are the before-the-fact, proactive solutions? Did we have any? Could a wisdom curriculum serve as a proactive solution, with the goal of nurturing the growth of emotionally healthy people?

I began to search for wisdom. Could I find it and observe it and learn the nature of wisdom. I searched for wisdom in individuals, wisdom in families, wisdom in schools, wisdom in nature, wisdom in neighborhoods. I sought out wisdom in foresight, in sound planning and design, and wisdom in hindsight, in thoughtful reaction and response.

I began to understand that the wisdom of our minds is related to the wisdom of places, for we are shaped by the culture that surrounds us. What does a wise workplace, a wise school or a wise home look like? What are the elements of physical design and social design that can foster wisdom? How do we engender wisdom in our schools and homes?

Before I go further into how I study wisdom, I should share a bit about why I study wisdom. I have come to say that our challenges are the greatest teachers, and this has been the case with me, as my emotional struggles have guided my studies. My personal battles with anxiety extend over many chapters of my life and are worthy of their own book,

but since this is not the focus of this book, please accept a brief overview.

I am a very emotional person. Which basically means that the state of my emotions, whether joy or despair, has a strong affect on me. I have always been this way, and this was never really a problem until the end of college. I had always been surrounded by my clan, my tribe – family, schoolmates, teammates, etc. Throughout my whole life I had my people. But then at the end of college, the social nature of my life rapidly changed.

It is during transitions that we are at our most vulnerable. And as college ends, ones tribe disperses, ones daily routine is over. You graduate and everyone says, good luck, go off on your own and build a life. Now for some people this works out fine, but for me, this transition triggered tremendous anxiety.

It doesn't sound bad now. But when you are in the midst of anxiety, the rational mind is swallowed whole by the emotional mind and the emotional mind is sending out incessant alarms. It is scary, as scary as anything I have ever dealt with. To have alarms going on in your head and have no idea what they mean and where they are coming from is a waking nightmare. Anxiety is a nightmare. It seems like a malfunction of the brain.

I could not sleep more than a couple of hours and then I would shoot up with all this harried energy and I would just survive hour-by-hour in discomfort. But no one had ever explained anxiety to me. I had no idea what was going on. Finally I spoke to a trusted older friend and he told me that I needed to get into therapy immediately.

With the help of therapy and medicine, I began to understand my mind. But the essential question remained, a question that has guided much of my research ever since - how were we not teaching people about the very real and looming threats of anxiety and depression?

Looking back on my darkest nights of anxiety, I feel lucky to have survived. And I do not say this to be dramatic. Every time I hear about a young person taking their lives, I feel their pain. I know their pain.

I felt called to respond. And twelve years later, I am still working on my response every day.

Mind and Culture

The first lesson I came to understand was that in studying wisdom we must, first of all, know ourselves. We must know how we interact with different settings. Wisdom is an amazing field of study because one can study wisdom anytime, anywhere: while waiting in line at the grocery store, while out to dinner with friends, while cutting up potatoes and onions. As long as we have some level of self-awareness, we have already begun the study of wisdom. Our desire for peace of mind, for peace in our relationships, for fulfilling work shows me that the hunger for wisdom is there. The challenge is to develop this field of study, to make wisdom a foundation of a healthy life.

When we study our own selves, we begin to know our unique individual selves, but we also become familiar with something deeper, something that connects us with humans across the globe. We discover our human nature, we begin to understand the universal elements to our human lives: laughter and joy, sadness and despair, and everything in between. Observing the interaction between our shared human nature with different settings can yield great insights into both our nature and the nature of our culture. And since we live in a time when culture changes as rapidly as it ever has, this practice of observing our unique selves, our human nature and our culture is essential work.

I have found that once we develop a practice of observation, we will naturally stumble upon true insights, even timeless insights. Many say that wisdom is unchanging, that there are some absolute truths about wisdom. What are these truths and how do we discover them? How do we try them out? How do we make them a part of our daily lives?

In founding the Urbanmonks Thinktank, I have tried to create a location where ideas can be gathered and shared on the process of adjusting our approach to emotional health. Generally we do not focus on a proactive approach, but rather we react and try and fix problems after they arise. This approach works reasonably well, but when we are facing the situation where millions are dealing with the common emotional maladies of anxiety and depression, when we have twice as many suicides as murders in America, it is time to think proactively: how do we make us more resilient? How do we grow wiser children, teens, adults and elders?

The second aspect that the Urbanmonks Thinktank proposes is a system-based approach. We currently try and fix the individual. Yet, we are all products of our environments. It is my observation that many of those struggling with anxiety and depression are not inherently damaged people, but they are normal humans placed in cultures (systems), both large and small, that foster anxiety and depression.

So my method is born out of this goal: to investigate the relationship between our minds and the settings, both the physical settings and the social systems, we have built. I have come to refer to this study as Emotional Topography. Topography meaning the detailed mapping or charting of an area. In this case, we are building emotional maps.

By *culture* I am referring to the many layers of culture. There is indeed a culture of our relationships, of our households, of our workplaces, our villages and neighborhoods. Culture means the social setting: the relationships between characters and the rules, official and implied that govern the social system. Culture also includes the physical settings: the general ambiance, the lighting, the colors and the textures of a place.

Too often we think too large when we think about social systems, when we think about culture. American Culture. Modern Culture. These are enormous. Trying to change the trajectory of these levels of culture is an

overwhelming task. It is more empowering and more possible to change our local systems, our local cultures.

The key method for my study is anthropological in nature: to spend time in dozens of different settings and to compare the various experiences. I have lived in large cities, small cities, and rural towns. I have worked many short-term jobs, from seasonal positions to year-long teaching gigs. My jobs have paid the bills, as jobs do, but I have sought out jobs where I was going to learn a whole new set of skills and be exposed to a new sub-culture.

Take the past three years in New York City as an example. I taught in a diverse inner-city high school in Brooklyn. Then I honed my design and carpentry skills by building a street cart to sell books in Union Square Park. As I write these words, I am managing a café in Soho part-time. Three very different worlds, three different sets of relationships and responsibilities. Three very different landscapes when we consider them from the lens of emotional topography, yet all three are nestled within the broader American culture and New York City culture.

All of the years since I studied Urban Design in graduate school have been similarly variable. But this is how I have performed my independent research, with new skills and new relationships in different settings. The theory was that if I could know enough workplaces, enough sub-cultures, enough systems, enough relationships, I would have a good sense of how this human mind worked - how it thrived and how it crumbled – in relation to various settings. The theory was that if I worked alongside hundreds of people and was able to interact with thousands of folk in various settings, I would begin to better understand what was unique about individuals, but also, and more importantly for our study, what was common to us all.

Looking back on my meandering path of employment, common themes do emerge. My jobs all reside within three main fields: teaching,

agriculture, and food service. These three fields seem very different, but I now see that they are united in a common element. They are all connected to the process of growth and nurture: raising healthy plants and animals, raising healthy children and adults, and nurturing the most basic of human daily retreats, shared meals.

The word *teach* comes from an Old English root word that meant to "show, declare, warn, persuade." Over the years, as I have taught, I have indeed *shown*, but as any teacher will tell you, I have been shown so much. Each day is a learning experience for the teacher, as they gauge how and when the teaching worked and how and when the teaching failed.

My teaching began by working with mentally-handicapped adults while I was in high school. In graduate school I was able to help teach a number of courses in the field of City Planning. My favorite teaching gig – to the most appreciative students – came next: teaching math and facilitating a poetry workshop at Auburn Maximum Security Prison. My most recent teaching opportunity was teaching World Religions to high school students in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Throughout all these teaching jobs, the aspect that resonated most with me was the opportunity to mentor. And this is not solely the guide for my role as teacher, but this is how I approach my role as writer. When I mentor, I feed kindling to already burning fires. I aim to help fires grow stronger and more effectively. The mentor has the essential task of guiding, of encouraging, of providing feedback, of keeping it real through the sharing of one's own battle stories. My most successful book, *Prayers and Knives and other Meditations on the Search for Mentors*, was my first attempt to pay complete respect to the life-changing role of a good mentor.

The benefit of all these various teaching environments was the intimacy established between teacher and student, between mentor and mentee. The role of the teacher is to help the healthy growth of this human being.

And the opportunity to help us grow healthy minds and spirits in these various sub-cultures – Ivy League college classrooms, inner city schools, tough prisons – is enlightening because I am able to see what we all share in common. It allowed me great insight into how we grow and learn, and what limits our abilities to grow and learn.

The grass is always greener on the other side; that which we lack is exalted and that what we have is often taken for granted. As I am writing these words in a dense urban environment, the grass is much greener, over that fence, in the fields and in the greenhouses. Nature-based jobs, though physically taxing, seem like a grand retreat compared to the overstimulation of New York City. While working with plants one is literally hands deep in soil, the culture in which plants grow. Here there are parallels to teaching, for the end goal is to help healthy growth. But in the fields it is less about growing healthy humans and more about growing healthy garlic bulbs, raising strong bee hives, trimming trees to allow for optimal fruit production. It is grounding being on farms, where there is an intimacy with nature, with creation, where there are many hours spent learning how soil and plants thrive.

Working in greenhouses, raising tens of thousands of newborn tomato and pepper plants from seed, is akin to teaching, to mentoring, but so much less chaotic, so wonderfully quiet. Probably too quiet for most, but once you become acclimated to the rhythms, one finds a calming camaraderie with the birds that pass by each day. Afternoon breezes are a daily event. How will tonight's sunset be? When will the next rain come through? The weather is the ultimate authority, dictating when certain activities occur. There is a peace in the time spent with soil, trees, plants, animals, and insects.

Beekeeping is something I wish everyone could do at some point in their lives, because beehives are their own little communities with different bees having different roles. The hive is a social system and there are

distinct relationships between various parts of the hive. There are worker bees that never fly far from the hive and then there are the foraging bees that fly off for up to three miles in any direction, engaging in the entire ecosystem. The foraging bees fly any day above fifty degrees to pursue nectar, the sweet sugar of flowers that has evolved to attract pollinators. They also gather pollen, the protein and vitamin-rich male seeds of the plants. Beekeeping encourages one to think like the bees, to observe the weather and to always be on the lookout: is the clover blooming yet? How has the rain been during this flow of locust nectar? Are there any bees in that cluster of wildflowers?

Then once a week you take the goods to market. I would work the stand for my beekeeping mentor, Duane. He taught me how to serve the bees and then serve the people who love to buy honey. On any given Saturday, I would sell hundreds of pounds of honey, beeswax candles and bee pollen, all the while answering questions about how bees work. At the market stand, all three of my spheres of work came together – agriculture, education and food service.

I was raised in a household where all three of us boys were taught: to serve others is to live a good life. Lucky for me, I have had numerous opportunities to get paid to serve others - in the glorious world of food service. Service work is where you really find yourself in the trenches. Here is where I have found myself taking care of people in their moments of relaxation, helping them enjoy a nice fish-and-chips dinner, dialing up some steamed milk for a cappuccino, or cooking them up a black bean burrito.

Waiting tables in the Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. Helping manage multiple cafes. Working as a line cook. Being a member of a catering crew a few dozen deep. These jobs require you to be part of a team. To ride the daily wave: the calm set-up, the intense rush, and the decrescendo clean-up. You are part of a system with many working

parts. And each restaurant or café is unique, but over time, just like with people, you begin to see the universals, what is similar across café to restaurant to catering gig. You begin to see the culture of each workplace, how it works smoothly and where it falls apart.

In these service jobs, you have the opportunity to engage with and to observe people all day long. All types of people, and often an endless flow of people, thousands every week. I am not sure how many people I have served over the years – tens of thousands I imagine – and each day there are a handful of interesting conversations. Each day I observe small social groups: how couples relate, how parents treat their kids, how individuals interact with the café. From this vantage, one can observe nascent social trends, e.g. the use of computers as babysitting devices.

The other major benefit of my service jobs is that I use them as a venue to introduce people to my studies and my writing. No matter what the social setting, I have been telling people about my Urbanmonks projects for the past dozen years or so and this conversation functions as an invitation for people to open up. And what I have found is that people want to talk, people are hungry to reflect with others, people have solutions to brainstorm. And this is the idea for the Urbanmonks Thinktank, that we only know so much on our own, but if we can collect our little drops of wisdom, we can learn how to grow healthy: grow healthy individuals, grow healthy families, and grow healthy communities.

A Good Life, a Good Day

Now that you understand my approach to wisdom, let us explore the specific skill that this book focuses on: building a simple daily ritual of self-reflection.

The ancient philosophers often debated about this notion of ‘a good life.’ What is a good life, and, how does one build a good life? This remains an essential starting point. But I would like to offer a correlated point. I offer one improvement to this approach: that as we try and think about building a good life, we concurrently think about building a good day and a good week.

I have found that the first step to building a good life, a life that you are proud of, is to start small. We must begin our pursuit of a good life by building a ritual of stepping back and reflecting, a ritual of daily retreat. It is important to have this long-range vision of a good life, but our life is lived day-by-day and the day is a manageable portion which we can focus on, understand, and improve.

A ritual of daily reflection is the greatest thing missing in most of our lives. And this is missing for many reasons. First and foremost, many of our old rituals for reflection have been displaced by a modern culture that does not emphasize retreat and reflection. Secondly, retreat is often intimidating. It can seem scary to truly listen to and observe ourselves. But one must trust the process; one must trust that this is essential work.

Retreat is not a luxury. Retreat is something that we *need*. We need some quiet time in order to know ourselves, we need some quiet time in

order to understand this human life and how we can make the most out of our lives.

Life is tough. Life can be viewed as a very challenging sport. Imagine if a team never had a meeting with the coach where they gathered around and made a plan for that day's game. Imagine if a team never had a meeting after that day's game. That would not be a very good team. But yet, this is how many of us live our lives, in the middle of the game at all times, without any breaks off to the side to check in and make a new plan.

Hilltops

What does this word, *wisdom*, mean to you? Take out a piece of paper and jot down all you can. Think of people who have wisdom, what about them makes you think they have wisdom? Think of the word. What other words does this make you think of?

Wisdom is such an important word, but where does this word come from? It is a good habit of smart thinking to look back in history for clues. Remember that history is our story. We all come out of the past. Everyone alive today has had great-great-grandparents who hustled and survived.

Far enough back, our ancestors decided to start writing down symbols. What began with cave paintings, dirt scrapings and woodcarvings has evolved for tens of thousands of years into what we now use every day. If we can trace where this word wisdom has come from, will it give us any clues as to how to learn to be wise? Will it help point us towards the essence of wisdom?

Words are cultural artifacts. Each one with its own history. Each one with its own ancestors, its early forms, its early influences. Because the letters that make up words are so familiar to us, we forget that they are images, they are symbols. And words are, at their essence, strings of symbols, that in turn, symbolize.

The word wisdom comes from the collision of two words, *wis* and the suffix *-dom*. The root word *wis* comes from old Germanic origins,

meaning “to see, to know.” The word *wise* and *vision* come from the same historical root. The suffix *-dom* refers to dominion, the domain, the estate. Think of other words that end with the suffix *-dom*. *Kingdom*, the state of the king. *Freedom*, the dominion of the free. So wisdom essentially refers to the place of vision, the domain of clear perception, the province of sound judgment.

To be wise is to see far and wide. To see clearly. To have vision.

Words that represent big concepts like wisdom are powerful; when they become linked with an image in our minds, the concept they represent can grow even stronger. Here is the story of the image I found to represent wisdom.

I lived for many years in Ithaca, a small city located in a valley surrounded by rolling hills covered in farmland and forests. The last few years I lived there, I spent time living close to the downtown, on the floor of the valley. On my evening strolls I would want to climb up the hills, to an overlook, to take in the town and the vastness of the setting. The problem was that to hike to the hilltops would take hours. I needed to find a hilltop close to home, amongst the flats.

It was on a snowy December evening when I first discovered my urban hilltop that would become a refuge for me for many years. I climbed to the tallest peak in the downtown, the top floor of a downtown parking garage, and from up there it was like I stepped out of my day-to-day life and communed with the skies and the town on a different level.

Up there, I was a bit removed from myself; it is like I would step into a different mindset, a different persona. I would observe myself, but I would observe myself from a distance, as one of the many living in the village below this hilltop. The snowy nights up there were the most poignant, because the scene was so quiet, nearly absent of sound. Looking down the seven stories, I could see all the impressions of those

that had crossed by this street in the past few hours – the paths of footsteps, the tracks from bike tires and strollers and cars. The quiet and the absence of activity at this late night hour, juxtaposed with so many steps and tracks left behind seemed to inspire a level of reflection and quietude that I had sought for some time.

From this vantage, I just felt a level of calm. Was that part of wisdom - a calmness, a contentment? Up there on the rooftop, did I forget about myself a bit and instead focus on my common human-ness? And I do not mean to speak down to my common human-ness, I mean to celebrate it. This common-ness, our uniquely flavored but inherently common joys and struggles, this is what made us human. This is what I mean by our common human-ness.

These hilltop rituals were mostly about stepping back, stepping out of my life. But what was going on in these moments? My conversations with myself would sound something like this:

Was today a good day? No, today was miserable. I felt stressed about this coming move. I felt lonely. I felt lost in life. Well, can I learn from today's challenges? For if I can learn from the tough times, am I not doing the ultimate daily alchemy, transforming tough days into the greatest teachers of all?

Up there on this urban hilltop, I could reflect, I could be thankful for the day in its entirety, I could feel refreshed and optimistic for tomorrow and I could walk home and sleep well.

My ritual was coming together.

Perhaps a ritual of reflection can be viewed as a ritual of digestion. And we need to step away in order to digest properly. And in today's world of computers in our pockets, we can choose to never really digest our

days; and this is why we have to make it a ritual. We have to prioritize it or it will never happen.

We come to some peace with the chaos not from trying to control it all, but by stepping back to a calm place and being all right with it all. By seeing clearly what we can influence, what we can control – our efforts, and our response to what the world offers today – and also seeing and accepting all that is out of control.

Building Your Wisdom Ritual

A ritual is akin to a long rudder on a sailboat that keeps it upright in strong winds. It is a compass that keeps us moving towards the goals we deem worthwhile.

A good ritual reinforces the mythos of one's life. By mythos, I mean the guiding storyline, the direction, the goals. The most important ritual is the wisdom ritual, because it is the ritual that encourages continued growth and exploration and it is the ritual that prioritizes emotional self care. A good ritual will align your days with your weeks, your weeks with your seasons, your seasons with your years.

I propose a set of hilltop rituals, rituals of mental digestion, rituals of mini-retreat. They occur three times a day and they can last for five to fifteen minutes each. The key is to build a ritual that is not a chore, but a small gift that we give to ourselves. It must be something that we find useful and life-affirming. However, in the beginning, any new ritual takes some effort to establish. This is why I have designed this as a six-week course, to get the ball rolling. After that point, if the general ritual has taken root in you, it will evolve and become your own.

The Evening Ritual – Digestion

It may seem strange to begin at the end of the day, but I would argue that this is the most important ritual of digestion. With apologies for oversimplicity, let's argue that there are good days and that there are bad

days. And there are some days that are a mixture of good parts and bad parts.

For the good portions of our day, we can allow this to fuel our gratitude. Gratitude is about understanding how good or bad a day in the life can be. Gratitude is born out of this perspective. This view of 'how life works' allows us to both accept the tough days as just a part of life and to be grateful for the good fortune that befall some of our days.

So let us be grateful for the good. To revisit the joy it provided in all its forms: the co-worker who makes us laugh, the nice conversations, the enjoyable book we are reading, the pleasant walk after work, the great meal we had with our brother, the hope felt for the future.

Next we must focus on the bad, the tough, and the challenging aspects of our day. If we climb up to that wisdom hilltop, we create some space from our immediate emotions, our reactions of distaste towards ourselves, towards others, and to that which happened on this day. Once we establish this distance, then we are free to learn, then we can transform. And if we can learn from the tough times – and these are the best teachers – well then we are well on our way to a life that we can feel proud of.

If we can receive the day with gratitude and learning each night, every day can be a rich day. And the toughest days, even if they are tough to make it through, can be embraced for their rich lessons. If a good day is made, a good week is probable, and a good life is possible.

I know it seems simple, but most wisdom is simple. It just takes practice.

The evening ritual questions to be reflected upon to be written in a notebook:

1) Was today a good day, a tough day, or something in between?

2) What made it good? What made it tough?

3) In response to the great times: ((gratitude)) what can I be grateful for before I rest?

4) In response to the tough times: ((learning)) what can I learn from today that can help me grow a bit? What were today's challenges? How could I have responded better to today's challenges?

The Morning Ritual – Foundation

Start the day with some simple pleasures. Enjoy a few minutes of music, of stretching, of prayer, of coffee. I enjoy to read the paper and enjoy a coffee and do a cryptoquote puzzle. Take some time to climb up to that hilltop, to know that today will be good in some ways and will be tough in others.

It is worth having calm time in the morning, even if it requires heading to sleep a little earlier the night before. To wake up and immediately be stressed and rushed is to set in motion a stressful day. Even ten minutes of calm can shift the direction of your day.

Questions to reflect upon and to sketch your responses in your notebook:

1) Where I am at right now, this morning?

2) What is the greatest challenge I expect to face today? What is my strategy (response) for dealing with it? Do not put pressure on yourself to master your challenge today. Instead, aim to do better than you did yesterday. Improvement is growth. Growth should be celebrated.

3) Find some way to connect this 'good day' to your vision for a 'good life.' How can you continue to grow, to build the life you want to live today. Small steps, every day. Even if you are stuck in a situation that you find miserable, figure out a way to study, to grow, to find joy even

for a small portion of the day. Think of how you can keep growing today.

The Mid-day Ritual – Half-time

Where you place this ritual is up to you. It is meant to be like the half-time coaches meeting where you head to the locker room and regroup. It is your opportunity to step back and build off a positive first half or just let it go. In a way, this mid-day ritual is a combination of the evening and the morning rituals, it is part digestion of the day so far and part connecting to your foundation.

For some, this ritual will occur at lunchtime or at a break in the afternoon. For others, perhaps this ritual belongs after school or work is over. Try out different spots for this ritual; see what works best for you.

Questions to reflect upon and to sketch your responses in your notebook:

1) Where I am at right now, this afternoon?

Take some deep breaths. When we breathe deep, even for two minutes of deep breaths, part of our brain thinks, *oh we are calm now, the challenge is gone*. We can reset in this way.

2) What is going well that I can build off of?

3) What has gone poorly that I am holding on to? Can I digest it, learn from it, and then let it go? If I am having a tough day, can I use this break in the action to reset, to redirect?

Keeping these questions in a notebook, three times a day for six weeks will teach you more than you can imagine. Trust the process. See what emerges.

Emotional Topography

Now we are going to take our wisdom studies to the next level by adding a visual component to our hilltop rituals. By using charts to supplement our notes, we can see trends that may not be so obvious to us in our written reflections.

These charts appear in a few pages. Feel free to check them out now before I explain them. Over the years, I have experimented with the design for these charts, and here is the best I have to offer at this time. I have designed a scale that goes from -10 to +10. You can picture it like an emotional thermometer.

Here is the basic scale of what each range of numbers means:

+8 to +10 ... Almost manic, invincible, exuberant, so high that you forget the ups and the downs. Note: for some people this very positive end is no problem. But for others, like me, being this far to the positive end is not ideal. If I were to label my emotions as +9, I would consider myself over-stimulated, emotionally hyper in a way that often leads to a crash.

+3 to +7 ... Great optimism. This is the 'life is good' range. Here one feels joyful and hopeful, but not ecstatic. This is a great place to be.

-3 to +3 ... Middle of the road, awareness of both the good and bad, generally content and at peace. -3 to +3 is a place of balance. Life is fine. I am not sad or overjoyed, I am fine. I might be a little positive or a bit negative, but all in all, I am in balance. I am content. I am good.

-3 to -7 ... The storm zone. Great pessimism; sadness or down-feelings dominate. Being in the -3 to -7 range is not disastrous, but this is a tenuous position and one must be aware of the storms and have some clear ideas of how to respond.

-8 to -10 ... The danger zone. Extremely negative, hopeless, feeling that things are permanently bad, that things will never improve. The danger zone requires immediate attention.

Please note that the specific design of the charts will resonate with some and not with others. If you enjoy the concept but want to design your own charts, this is encouraged. While teaching this method to a close friend, she did not resonate with the charts, but she saw the merit in the concept. She wanted to keep track of her emotional states by using a color system. So she designed her own visual system for charting her emotions for six weeks. (I will happily post well-designed alternative visuals on the Urbanmonks Thinktank website.)

Assessment

The key to using this chart is the development of two skills, assessment and strategy. To assess is to know where you are at right now. Once we assess where we are, then we can strategize the best plan forward.

So where are your emotions at this minute? Let us practice checking our emotional thermometer. I'll go first: I am feeling inspired yet also frustrated. I believe that these charts and this book can be very helpful for some visual learners but I also feel that it might be too cumbersome, it might not resonate. I have hopes and doubts concurrently. I would put myself at the lower range of the 'middle zone' at about -2.

Last night I went to an event by myself and there was a lot of small talk and it sort of left me feeling very lonely. I was at about -5. Finding myself in this range of -3 to -7 is such a crucial place for me to have a

wise response. I know that at -5, I have to take care of myself right away or I can fall down pretty far. So I respond by heading to a place of refuge. I left the event and went straight home where I treated myself to some relaxed reading and then I watched a comedy on television. Before I went to sleep, I felt regrouped. Now that I was calm, I took time to reflect on my day, a day in which I spent so many hours in the +5 range, having good connections with people at work, feeling solid about life, and then I crashed. Whenever I see a crash like that, I try and always figure out why this happened. Here I can see that going to a small talk evening event by myself can be a big challenge and can leave me feeling quite alone. In the future, can I go to functions where there is a better chance of a more natural camaraderie? Or can I go to these types of events with a friend? Or can I have a concrete plan for afterwards?

Strategy: The Storm Zone

When we find ourselves at +3, +5 or even a -2, we are at a relatively balanced or positive place. We are likely able to make clear decisions from this vantage. However, when we find ourselves in the storm or danger zones, we must have strategies already in place.

I tend to enter the storm zone every week or two. So a -5 for me is not terribly unusual, but it could lead me to tumble down into the danger zone. So when I find myself in the -3 to -7 range, I have a clear strategy, I head to my refuges. Refuges are places where I can seek shelter and recharge, where I feel I can weather any storm. Refuges are very personal and we must take time to create a list of possible refuges.

Refuges come in many forms: making plans to cook a meal with a friend, heading to the beach for a run and some time with nature, reading a novel. If we can access reminders to keep calm during storms, this will serve us well. When I am in the storm zone, I sometimes read a note to myself that reminds me 'everything is going to be ok, just accept these storms, take cover, you will be all right in a couple of days.'

Strategy: The Danger Zone

If we do not catch ourselves in the storm zone and end up in the danger zone, we need to be very cautious in trusting our own thoughts, because they are often hijacked by our emotions. The danger zone is very serious; here is where we lose people to suicide. Climbing out of the danger zone on our own can take weeks or months, therefore we must develop a strategy on how to respond to this ahead of time.

When we do fall into the danger zone, it is imperative to let others know you are there. In a perfect world, we would each have a few people in our lives that we form a team with and we agree to always reach out to each other when we are in the -8 to -10 range. When in the danger zone, it makes sense to also reach out to professional help as well. Seek out a therapist or use a suicide hotline to help guide you through this very difficult terrain.

My Chart Example

In the following pages, you will see the six weeks of charts for you to fill in. I have also included an example of one week of my chart.

When I fill in my chart I actually fill in the notes section first, day by day, and when I fill out the notes section and then I chart my numbers. Then I try and note why my day went this way. Good or bad, can I figure out why the day went the way it went. I find it particularly noteworthy if there is a huge increase or collapse in my day.

If I went from a -2 to a +5, what happened?

If I went from a +3 to a -5, what happened?

On a day where I was steadily high or steadily low, what was the main reason why?

Advanced Charting

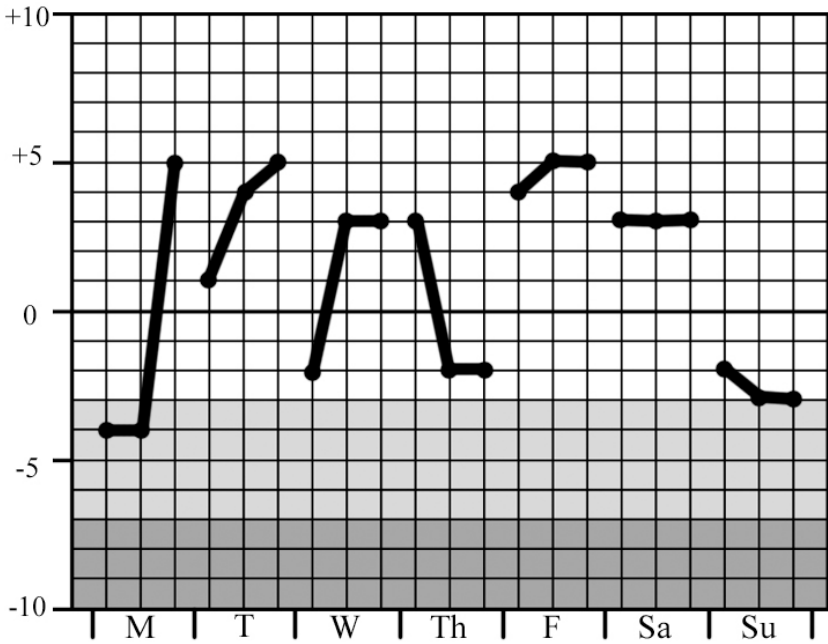
If you enjoy charting, add in a second variable for a few weeks while you observe your emotional health. Ideally you would choose something to observe as a potential correlation with your emotional health. You could keep track of your daily exercise by developing a system on the same scale -10 to +10 to rate your exercise efforts. Or you could keep track of your eating habits. Or track the actual weather. Or the cycles of the moon.

I think it would be fascinating to chart how many meaningful connections we have in a day and see how that related to our emotional health. Or how many hours we spend in front of a computer or tv screen. The art and skill of observation can lead to fascinating discoveries.

One can also perform little experiments and see how their days go: What happens on days where you leave your phone behind for an hour? What happens when you begin a day with exercise? What happens when you take a break from certain foods and drinks for a few days?

Week One
(my example)

Dates: 5/11 - 5/17



Notes

M am -frustrated w/ writing; pm -helped friend w/ carpentry

T solid day, felt motivated, confident

W distracted in am; then hit work groove

Th cafe mgr work - stressful day there, tough

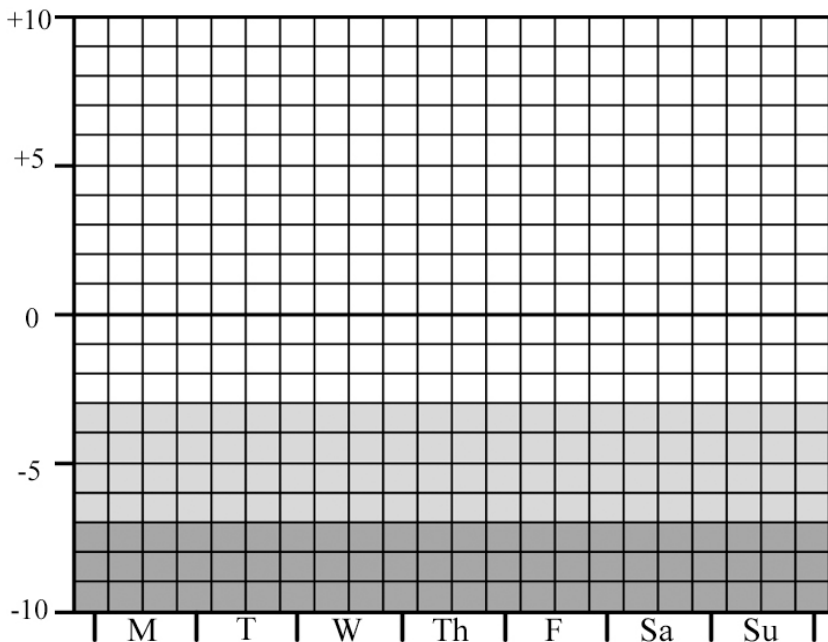
F haircut, chores, lots done feeling good

Sa cafe work, smooth day, met some good folk

Su put too much pressure on my writing progress, frustrated

Week One

Dates: _____



Notes

M _____

T _____

W _____

Th _____

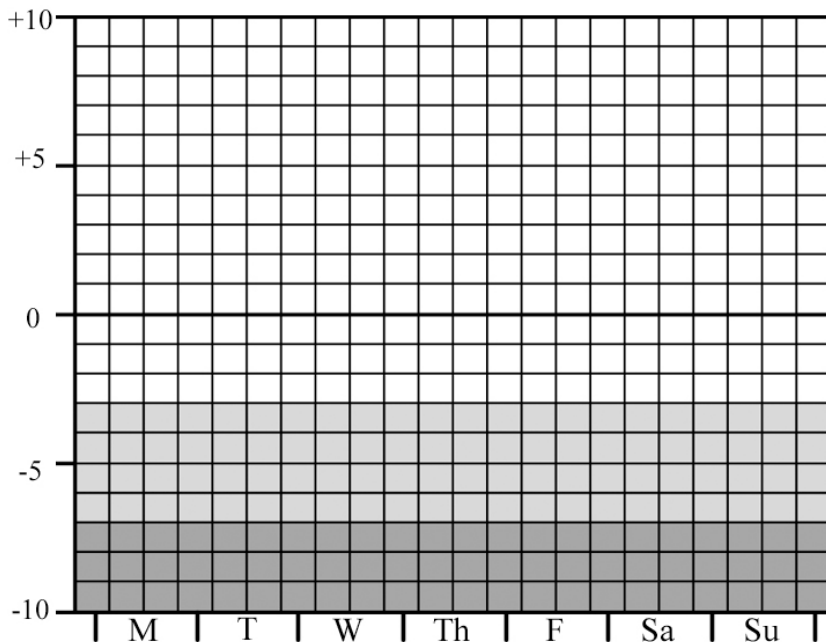
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Week Two

Dates: _____



Notes

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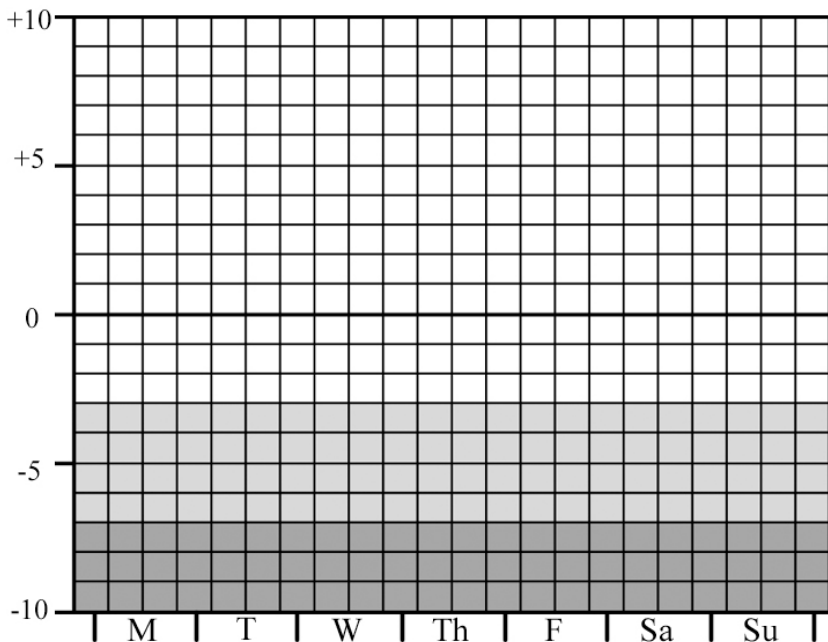
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Week Three

Dates: _____



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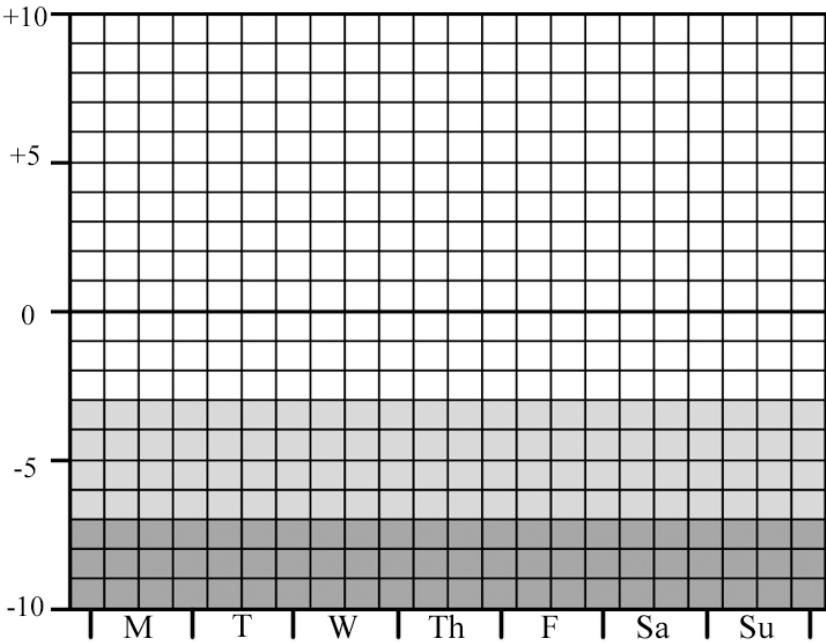
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Week Four

Dates: _____



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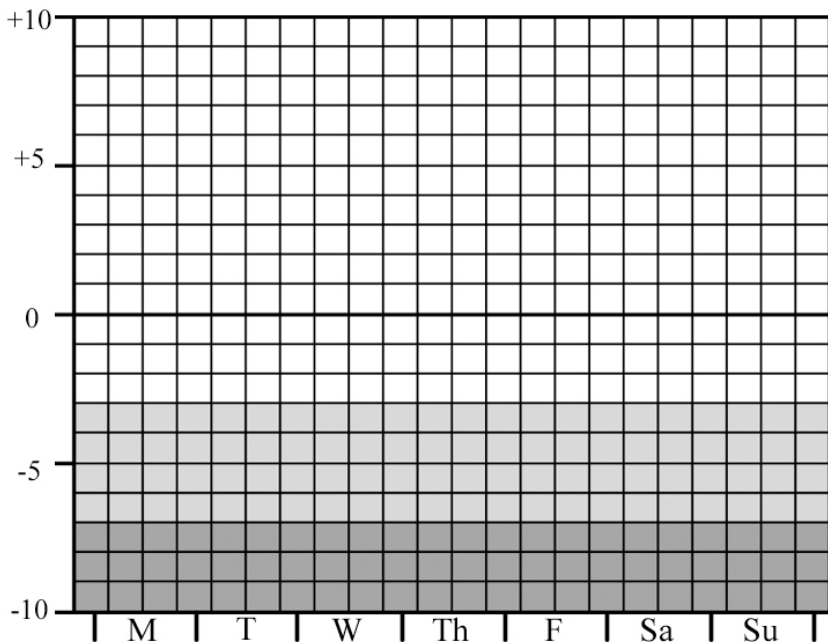
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Week Five

Dates: _____



Notes

M _____

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W _____

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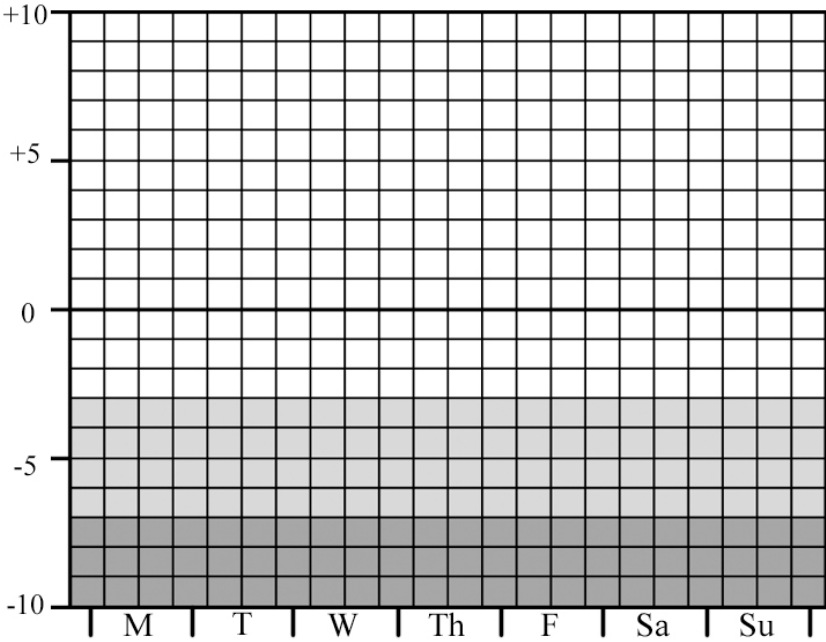
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Week Six

Dates: _____



Notes

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Conclusion

The skills emphasized in this book are assessment and strategy. They naturally feed into each other. Assessment informs strategy. Then we follow through on our strategies and we assess the new results. There is a natural ebb and flow that evolves.

The core aspect of this wisdom ritual is the observation of where we are at three times a day. But just as we step back and observe our selves during the day, we must step back and review the week. And we must look back again after the six weeks are over. As you review your week or the entire six weeks, make a list where you note every time you had a big sudden movement, either up or down. Check your notes and figure out what was the main reason that you moved up or down. What does this list reveal to you? Perhaps you will realize that your job, your relationship is bringing you down. Perhaps you will realize your relationship is keeping you afloat.

Looking back at the week example I shared, I saw a huge positive surge on the first day. When I check my notes I can remember that day. It was a calm Monday and I had high hopes for a long writing day. But my mind was not flowing and I was unproductive and grew very frustrated. I just kept on trying and failing and growing more disappointed with my results. Then I put down my work and went to visit my friend who needed help rebuilding the stairs in his new home. That evening turned out to be so fulfilling and it truly set the tone for a positive week. What I have learned over the months and years of self-reflection is that helping someone with a project makes me feel quite positive. Working on a physical project – painting, carpentry, gardening – is very satisfying. So

that night when I went to help a friend work on a physical project was perhaps the perfect evening activity to get back on track.

One of the essential lessons that you will learn in this process is knowing how to get back on track, how to re-center ourselves. Earlier on I wrote about seeking out a refuge, a place to recharge, when we were in the storm or danger zones. But these refuges are not just to be used when we are in a bad state. We might discover our refuges as we climb out of a tough state, but then we must figure out how to be more proactive by creating rituals that ground us frequently so that we are more resistant to getting really low. These activities can be solitary or communal, they can be indoors or outdoors. But we must find them.

As we continue to examine our list of rapid highs and rapid lows, examine the times when we slid in a negative direction. Here we can gain insight into the activities, locations, and relationships that are bringing us down. Once we understand why we crash, we have a better sense of where we need to focus on improving. Looking at your list of times you slid down rapidly, and noting the situation, examine questions like these: how can I improve this relationship? What about it is bringing me down? Should I be looking for a new job? Why do I feel down the day after I go out really late? Maybe I need more sleep than I am getting?

A few more things to observe when you look back at the end of the week or the end of the six weeks:

How many times did you slip into the storm zone? The danger zone?

Did you generally wake up in a better or worse place than when you went to sleep?

Trust in the process of self-reflection. Trust in the process of digestion. These rituals will yield insights. After six weeks of these rituals, you

will understand yourself better. And you will understand other people better. Keep it up for another few months and who knows what else you might come to understand.

Closing Meditation

This summer I learned to listen - more than ever before - to the weather. I used the incessant rain clouds of June and the cumulous clouds of August to teach, to guide, to remind me that all is change, that no matter how much I will for a certain cloud formation, or storm, or heat wave, it is out of my hands.

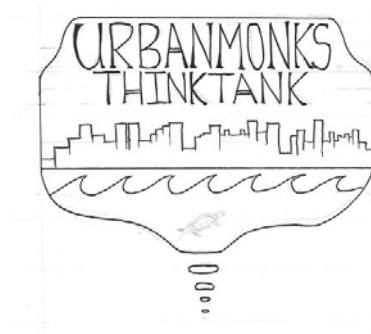
I would remain aware of the clouds, of the temperature, and the temperament of all that surrounded me. I felt solidarity with both the calm stretches of high-pressure, sunny afternoons and the humid, explosive, thunderous evenings.

For months, I observed the weather. At some point I began to experiment with the notion: *perhaps all of life moved like the weather*. The weather in this subway car, the weather on this bus, the weather inside the walls of this library. The weather on our streets and the weather in our households. But what was the nature of these smaller weather patterns? Was the weather on the bus, on the train, and in the library simply the culmination of all the weathers of all the individuals who shared that space at that moment?

The weather of our minds. The storms in our dreams, both waking and asleep. Days of bright sun and oppressive heat. Snowy seasons and their muddy, slushy aftermath. The weather of our passions and our projects. The weather of our relationships. Was all of life moving at the whims of the weather of the skies and the weather of our minds? Did we have any agency, did we have any say in the weather in this room, on this bus, in this café? Did we have any influence over the weather in our minds? Was there any weather we controlled?

While there was an element of our minds that does move like the weather, a part of our being that dances back and forth between stormy and calm, was there not also another part of our minds that decided how to react to this dynamic weather?

Perhaps this is the most essential choice we have each day. Perhaps this is root of our freedom: the choice to either stand on our rooftops, yelling and screaming, fists waving, cursing the torrential rains, or to put on a good pair of boots and a warm coat, to grab an umbrella, and head out for a long walk.



The Mission of the Urbanmonks Thinktank

What we call anxiety and depression has existed for many generations. Though we've used different words and applied different forms of treatment, one thing has remained constant: we have primarily diagnosed and treated the individual.

Two hundred years ago, depression was called melancholia and hysteria and was handled in many experimental ways. A hundred years ago, the Freudian revolution was in motion, and talk therapy began. Fifty years ago, prescription medication began to be widely used as a tool to help manage anxiety and depression.

Today, tens of millions of people struggle with anxiety and depression. We continue to focus on healing the individual, which is essential and life-saving work. But when debilitating anxiety and depression have become common conditions in all of our families and communities, we must step back and examine from a system point-of-view; we must examine the culture.

The Urbanmonks Thinktank proposes that we must, in the face of widespread anxiety and depression, shift our approach from solely diagnosing and treating the individual to *concurrently diagnosing and treating the culture*. We must explore a system-approach to

emotional health by understanding this key relationship between our minds and culture.

Feel Encouraged to Contact Us

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With Gratitude

First and foremost, I must thank my parents for raising me to think about life and for all their support over the years.

Next I would like to thank the following fine folks for their fastidious feedback on early drafts: Sophie Chauliac, Katherine Gorringer, Johnny McGill, Lisa Woodruff, Miguel ‘Miggs’ Ibarra, and Linda Krisch.