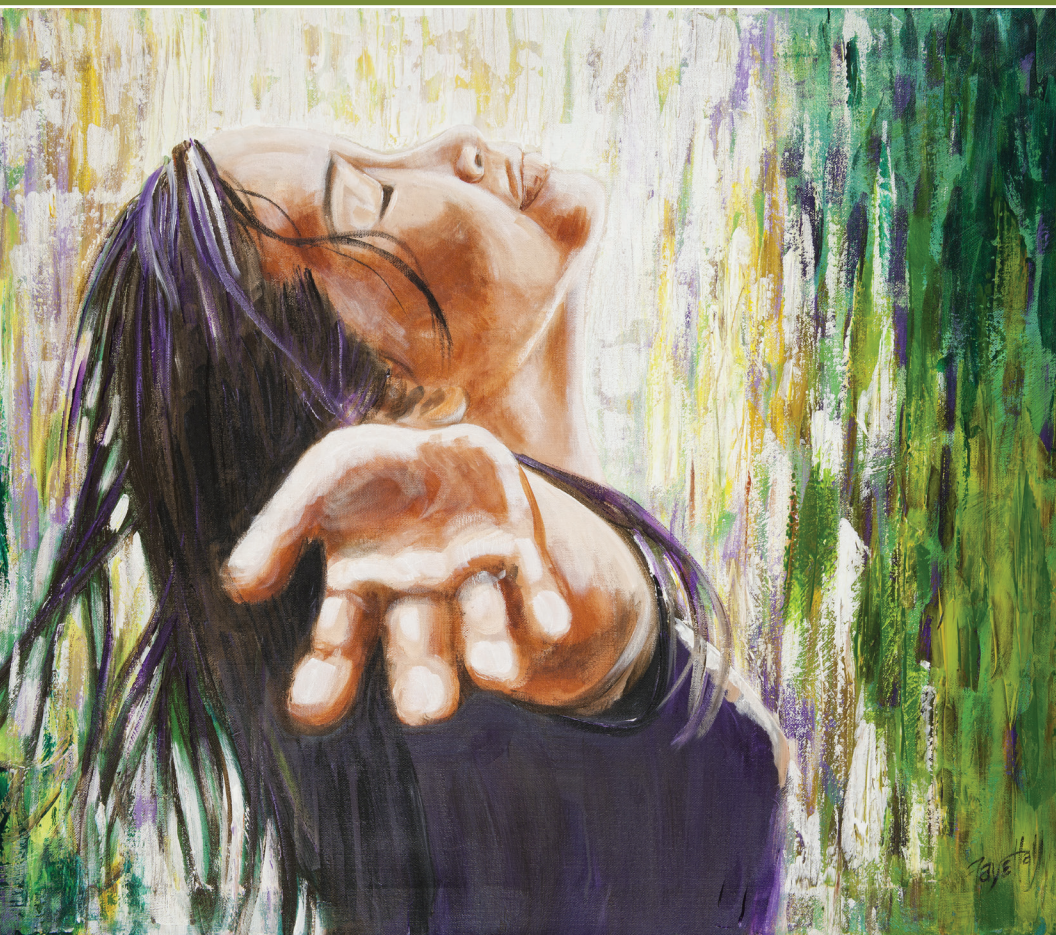


# Anxious No More

## Six Habits for a Happy Life



K. C. Ireton

## Before We Begin

For much of my adult life, I struggled with chronic anxiety.

If the title of this e-book drew you in with its promise of freedom from anxiety, I suspect you know how loaded that first sentence is, how much misery, wretchedness, guilt, and fear are encapsulated in those five words “I struggled with chronic anxiety.” In February 2015, I wrote in my journal, “180 days to joy. That’s what I want, God. I am sick of living in fear and anxiety. *I want joy.*”

Then I promptly forgot about it. I had a life to live and anxiety to battle. But God didn’t forget. Over the course of the next year, my anxiety levels plummeted through the floor. In the years since I wrote those words in my journal, I have experienced what I can only call a miracle of healing. As I’ve talked with various folks about this transformation from anxious to joyful, I’ve felt nudged to write down a bit of the story. In the pages that follow I’ll be sharing several of the practices (now habits) that have aided me in overcoming anxiety and enabled me to live with more joy than I used to think possible.

Anxiety is a complex thing, involving the physiological, psychological, and spiritual. Our problem in contemporary America is that we tend to focus almost exclusively on the physiological aspect of anxiety, which is at best only one-third of the problem. It is a crucial third, of course, and it’s therefore imperative that we deal with it. If you need medication, please be sure you get it! We don’t expect diabetics to roam the world without insulin; we don’t tell them it’s all in their heads and they should just get over it. In the same way, we should

not expect people with anxiety to just get over it. It is in part a physiological problem, and medication can be an important part of healing.

Adequate sleep, exercise, and proper nutrition are also crucial components of mental health. We live in an overfed and undernourished culture that is chronically sleepdeprived. If you struggle with anxiety, a large part of your work of healing is going to be to take care of these three basic areas. You are an embodied soul. Without your body, your life as you know it ceases. It is imperative that you care for your body. Feed it wisely and well. Get it moving (preferably outdoors). Give it eight hours of sleep every day. These are foundational habits for a happy life and will go a long way toward helping you overcome anxiety.

To reiterate: if you need medication, take it; the habits I outline are not meant to take the place of proper medication. Sleep. Eat well. Exercise. Dealing with the physiological causes of anxiety is crucial.

That said, it is not enough. We are not just bodies. We are spiritual as well as physical beings, and it the spiritual side of things that is grossly neglected in our materialistic culture. Now, simply eating well, exercising, and getting enough sleep may have a dramatic impact on your emotional well-being. But healing work must go deeper, and the deepest part of us is the spiritual.

The solution to our anxiety ultimately lies in God. At the very least this means we need to address spiritual reality when we tackle anxiety. For me, medication helped. Talk therapy helped. But it wasn't until I stopped running about and instead sat like Mary at the feet of Jesus for hours on end and listened to His voice and gazed upon His face of love that I finally knew a release from anxiety.

Truth be told, I don't know how beneficial the practices I outline will be apart from God's grace and help. Certainly they can't hurt. But the radical transformation I've experienced has occurred

because of God's grace upholding and undergirding the practices I've undertaken. Faith and trust are the bedrock on which all these practices rest. Without God's action to uphold and heal, all my work is for naught. At the same time, if I don't do my part, I won't be able to participate in the work God is already doing. Faith is the foundation because it causes me to act in certain ways, which in turn opens me to the healing work of God.

The order in which I share these practices in this e-book is (with one exception) simply the order in which I discovered them. Each habit led to the next, and together they created a scaffold or trellis upon which I could lean my life so it would grow. I hope and pray that they will prove to be as life-giving for you as they have been for me.

One final caveat: healing takes time. It was a good three months before the habits began to do their work in me and free me from anxiety. And it was almost a year before I realized with a sudden shock of joy that I was hardly ever anxious any more. If you don't see immediate results, don't be discouraged. Hold onto hope, and persevere. "We will reap a harvest if we do not give up." The harvest is there, but we have to sow before we can reap, and the growth of what is sown takes time. Be patient with yourself. And when you fall (which you will), remember that you fall into the arms of our loving Lord, who will help you up and set you back on the path and walk every step of it with you.

Here's to the journey to joy, friends!

## **Habit 1: Mind the Gap**

(Or, You Are Empowered)

As I was heading out the door to take my husband to the train station, I grabbed my cell phone. Immediately a cascade of anxiety washed through my body and with it the remembrance that a friend was angry with me. I stared at the phone in my hand, remembering our interaction the night before.

In years past, I would have fallen asleep with that phone conversation gnawing at me, replaying it over and over again in my head, and I would have woken up with it weighing on my chest. I am a people pleaser, highly sensitive to other people's responses to me, and I do not like friction in my relationships. Of all causes of anxiety, relational friction (whether real or perceived) has always been the most common for me. But I've experienced so much healing from anxiety in the past few years that it wasn't until I picked up the phone that I even remembered about that unpleasant situation, and by the time I'd dropped my husband off at the train and was headed home—a mere ten minutes later—I was fine. The anxiety was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Five years ago, I found myself directing my homeschool co-op. I had zero leadership experience, and I realized pretty quickly that if I didn't want to fall flat on my face or ruin the co-op and my relationships there, I was going to need some help. So I turned where I always turn when I need advice or encouragement or wisdom: to books.

The book that matters for our purposes here is *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey, which I'd read in my 20's and which still sat on my shelf. Re-reading it in my late 30's created a paradigm shift from which all the other habits I'll discuss fairly quickly cascaded.

Covey's first habit is "Be Proactive." Part of that chapter is a discussion of Viktor Frankl's discovery in a German concentration camp that in a dire situation in which he was cruelly and brutally mistreated, abused, and even tortured, he still had control over one very important thing: himself.

Reading Frankl, I was reminded of an old Buddhist story I'd heard in grad school about an army general bursting into a monastery and finding an old Zen master sitting calmly on a rock in the garden. The master remained unperturbed as the sword-wielding general advanced. "Why aren't you afraid?" the general demanded as he sliced his sword through the air. "Don't you know who I am? I'm the man who can cut off your head!"

"Yes," the Zen master replied. "And I'm the man who can let you."

At the time I both marveled at and was appalled by the story. But it's a story similar to Jesus's—He Himself said He could call down a legion of angels to deliver Him, but instead He let the Romans crucify Him. His choice was far harder than the Zen master's, for He had power to fight back and win, and He chose instead to submit to what looked like loss and suffer all that entailed.

How, I wondered, reading Frankl's words again, how do you get to be like that?

Covey, following Frankl (and countless others), insisted that there was a gap between stimulus and response, that you could choose how to respond. This was not new to me. For years—even decades—I had been told, "You can't control what happens to you. You can only control how you respond to what happens to you." And while I acknowledged the theoretical truth of that claim, my



understanding remained only that: theoretical. I had little, if any, experiential understanding. It seemed to me that I was already responding before I ever had a chance to choose how I would respond.

When I picked up my phone that morning, anxiety flooded my body before I could even think about choosing a response. So how exactly did one access that supposed gap between stimulus and response? For me there was no gap. The stimulus and my response to it were simultaneous.

And then it dawned on me: I wasn't responding; I was reacting—and my reactions were knee-jerk, reflexive, emotionally overwhelming ones. I was right: there was no gap. I was immediately anxious or angry (or whatever). I couldn't stop a cortisol or adrenaline response in my body—that reaction was so tightly bound up with whatever prompted it that I was in the middle of it before I even knew it had begun. I couldn't choose that reaction.

But—and here's where the paradigm shift happened—I *could choose how I responded to that reaction*. I could not choose not to have those emotions—but I could choose how my response to them. And the craziest part is that as I consistently chose my responses to these unwanted emotions, the emotions themselves gradually lessened!

At first, it was hard. I would often be well into an anxiety reaction before I even realized what was happening. I was on auto-pilot, doing what I'd habitually done for years: being anxious. Often it would take hours before I clued in. But when I did, that was the gap. At that point, I had a choice to make. Would I continue to react in this anxious way, feeding the anxiety with frantic activity or worried thoughts? Or would I breathe deeply and give the anxiety to God? (More on that in the next habit.)

As I practiced noticing my emotional reactions and responding to them in a thoughtful, rational manner, I began to see a fundamental shift in my way of being in the world, a shift from knee-jerk

anxiety to calmness, collectedness, peace, and joy. A shift that enabled me to experience victory the morning I picked up my phone: I felt anxious, yes, but there was an “I” greater than the anxiety, who was able to quickly, easily, and effectively respond to that anxiety and move forward with joy into the rest of my day.

That is the first habit for a happy life, friends: Mind the gap. It might not be where you think it should be (or where you want it to be), but it’s there. Once you find it, pay attention! That’s where your power to choose lies. At that gap, you can choose how you will respond, whether to the stimulus itself or to your own knee-jerk reaction to that stimulus. Either way, there’s a gap. Mind it.

{Habit 2 will address what to do once we’re aware of the gap. For now, simply practice being aware of it.}



## Habit 2: Cast the Circle

(Or, You Are Protected)

The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.  
I will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust.”

—Psalm 91:1-2

Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

—Colossians 3:3

For my 35th birthday my dear friend Susan gave me a beautiful old copy of *Streams in the Desert*, a 19th century devotional book. A week later my twins were born. One of them was in critical condition at death's door. His lungs kept collapsing, and he had to be ambulated to Seattle Children's Hospital. As I lay in bed, weary from labor and delivery, and helpless to help my baby, I picked up the book Susan had given me a week before and opened to the day's reading. The words could not have been more perfectly timed:

“No matter what the source of the evil, if you are in God and surrounded by Him as by an atmosphere, all evil has to pass through Him before it comes to you.”

That image was deeply comforting to me in those dark, scary days, when we were not sure if Ben would live or die. Looking back, I see that it was true: God surrounded us and strengthened us. We could

have been so much more frightened than we were. With babies in two different hospitals and two young children at home, we were stretched thin, but we found strength to endure the days of uncertainty and copious driving from hospital to hospital to home.

Ben lived, thanks be to God, and I never forgot that image of God as atmosphere, buffering the hardship and difficulty that comes into my life, not unlike the way earth's atmosphere burns up meteors. But it took five years before I began to appropriate the truth of it and actually live as though it were true.

The summer the twins turned five, Susan and I were talking about how life hits me so raw, about how I so often found myself in the middle of a reaction before I'd had time to contemplate how I wanted to respond. It had been a few months since my aha! discovery that the important thing about minding the gap was minding it, not where it was. Still, it was exhausting, all that anxiety and anger and fear coursing through my veins and me running to catch up with it and stop it in its tracks.

Susan said, "Cast a circle, Kimberlee. Take your reaction and put it back outside yourself. Create space between you and your reaction so you can see it." She stretched her hands arms-length in from of her, palms out, like a double palm strike to block whatever was flying at her. "Make a shield," she said, "and put the reaction you don't like on the other side of the shield."

Her words and the image of God as an atmosphere that I'd carried with me since the day of the twins' birth clicked together in my mind. God is the shield around me, and everything that reaches me goes through Him first. If I feel I can't handle it—if it's making me super anxious, say—I can grab it and place it outside what I have come to call my Jesus-shield.

And so I began to intentionally inhabit the image of God as atmosphere. I imagined—and I continue to imagine—Jesus surrounding me. I imagine myself standing in the circle of His love. I remind myself that whatever comes to me comes through Him.

When I feel anxious or afraid, I no longer run or get busy or freak out or even try to figure out why I feel anxious (anxiety will create a reason for itself, and the reason is almost always a lie or a blind, so it's usually counterproductive to ask why). Instead, I acknowledge it: "Wow. I'm feeling super anxious right now." And then I listen to my body: I notice where the anxiety is—usually it's in my chest, sitting on my heart like a weight, but sometimes it's in my gut and sometimes in my throat or on the top of my head—and I touch that part of my body and imagine I am grabbing hold of the anxiety and lifting it out of myself.

Then I stretch out my hand as Susan showed me and, imagining Jesus standing before me (because He is!), I place the anxiety in His hands. "Lord, I don't want this, but I seem unable to get rid of it, so I'm giving it to you. Would please burn it up in the fire of Your holy love?"

In the beginning, I had to do this a lot—sometimes I did it many times a minute. I will be honest: at first, it was exhausting. But within a month, I noticed I wasn't having to grab the anxiety nearly as often, and by the end of a year, I could go whole days without feeling the least bit anxious!

This is not to say I never feel anxious—I still do, sometimes—but I found that (over time) the more I gave the anxiety to God, the less anxiety I felt. And when I do feel anxious these days, it doesn't hound me the way it used to—ramping me up, keeping me busy and moving, anything to try to get rid of the horrible feeling that plagued me and insisted something catastrophic was about to happen. Giving that awful, overwhelming feeling to God over and over and over again robbed it of its power. When it comes, it's far less overwhelming than it used to be, far more manageable. I am no longer at its mercy because I know what to do with it. I know Whom to give it to—and I know that He is trustworthy and will do far more to help me than I can ask or imagine. I know this, because He has, and does.

That's Habit 2: cast the circle. Imagine Jesus standing before you, surrounding you like an atmosphere—because He is! Make the motion if it helps: hold your arms straight out in front of you, palms turned outward. Then move your arms out to your sides, as if you're creating a barrier an arm's length away from your face and body. Let this motion remind you that Jesus is standing about you as a hedge of protection, and that everything that comes to you passes through Him first.

In Habit 1 you practiced minding the gap—that place where you have the freedom to choose your response. Now, when you get to the gap, and you realize you're feeling anxious, grab the anxiety and place it outside your Jesus-shield—as often as you have to. When we live in the circle of God's love, we know peace and joy like we've never known before. But don't take my word for it. Cast the circle for yourself and see.

## Habit 3: Silence the Harpies (Or, You are Accepted)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

—Romans 8:1

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down.”

—Revelation 12:10

I was 13 years old when I let the harpies in. I didn't even know I was doing it. I couldn't know how much damage I was wreaking on myself by opening the door to these shrieking uglies. Of course, they didn't start by shrieking. They wormed themselves along the lines of my devotion to God. “God hates the proud,” they said. “Are you humble?” And then they whispered words of condemnation, words that in my youthful naivete I thought were wise words, words meant to humble me and rid me of my pride and draw me closer to God. I could not have said this then. I did not know what I was doing, or what the harpies were doing.

Twenty-six years later, they had become part of me, the ugly soundtrack in my head. They screeched with delight over my every failing. Every time I raised my voice or, God forbid, actually yelled at my kids, they'd keel over in gloating glee. “You yelled at your

children? These creatures God entrusted to you! That's awful. That's terrible. You're a horrible person, a horrible mother."

Every time I questioned my calling as a writer, they'd cackle and cry, "Writing is a waste of your time. No one reads your words. Clearly, you're not very good at this. You're a fraud, a poser, a loser."

Every time I felt overwhelmed by my life, they'd spit poison in my ears. "See," they'd hiss through their blood-red lipstick, "you can't hack it. You're weak and pathetic, and you'll never be any better than you are now. You're a joke and a failure." My thoughts ran their constant litany of accusation, fear-mongering, self-pity, self-loathing, self-flagellation, and self-condemnation.

My spiritual director, Margie, had been telling me for ten years, "Kimberlee, you know that's not the voice of God, right? You know that God's voice is a voice of love."

And I had nodded and said yes, which was true. I knew that God loved me. Of course I did. I was a cradle Christian. I'd been actively trying to follow Jesus my entire conscious life. How many millions of times had I sung "Jesus Loves Me" or some other song that proclaimed the love of God? Of course I knew those ugly voices weren't God's.

Except I didn't. And I didn't know that I didn't know until one December morning when Margie said something that turned my thought-life upside down. Or rather, right side up.

If the scene were a cartoon, we'd be pictured sitting in the small room at the back of Margie's house, where we'd been sitting and praying every month for a dozen years. Through the windows at my back and hers, you'd glimpse the bare branches of trees against the gray winter sky. In a speech bubble coming out of Margie's mouth would be, "blah blah blah crucifixion process blah blah blah."

Seriously. At the time it felt as though I had cotton in my ears that suddenly and only for a moment got pulled out so I could

hear those two words: crucifixion process. But those two words were what I needed.

I started up in my chair. “Margie!” I interrupted her. “That’s it! That’s it!” I stared at her with wide, wonder-filled eyes, trying to articulate the blinding flash of clarity her words had wrought in me. “All my life I’ve thought those voices in my head were the crucifixion process. I thought they were keeping me humble or—or somehow sanctifying me. I thought they were the path of salvation, the way of dying to myself. But it’s the voices that need to be crucified!”

Words cannot express the revolution that had just taken place in my thinking. If I had a personal devil whispering the harpies’ words into my mind, he would have been writhing in agony at that moment, cowering in fear because I’d found him out, gnashing his teeth in anger that his days of power over me were drawing to an end.

\*\*\*\*\*

On another gray December day a year later, I woke feeling anxious. At that time, anxiety was still not uncommon for me, but it had been awhile since I’d woken up feeling anxious. The day devolved from there. By mid-morning my heart was pounding and my hands were shaking.

There was nothing to be afraid of. No saber-tooth tigers lurking outside the door. No ugly emails in my inbox. No school, even. A day off! Yet all I wanted was to curl up in a ball in my closet and cry.

You see, the harpies were shrieking ugly words in my ears—words like *fool* and *failure*, like *poser* and *imposter*, like *greedy* and *grasping* and *hypocrite*. And they were flashing ugly visions before my eyes—visions of public humiliation and everyone laughing at me and me too stupid to realize it, visions of my children as adults



scorning and vilifying me, visions of a future marked by failure after failure after failure. And of course, they wrapped all this ugliness in a veneer of spirituality, making their fear-mongering words and images seem like Visions from Heaven, like foreknowledge from God Himself.

The harpies were loud that morning, and they only got louder the longer I covered my ears and pretended not to hear. The worst thing to do was the very thing I most wanted to do: cower in my closet and cry. It makes them so gleeful when I curve in on myself, and when they're gleeful, they're even more spiteful. So I put on my tennis shoes and took a walk. I breathed the crisp cold air and noticed the frost-covered leaves lining the sidewalks and jaunted down to my favorite little park with a bench overlooking the Sound.

Even as I walked, part of me was still curled up in a corner of myself, cowering in childlike fear of the harpies. Part of me was holding the cowering child, crooning over her and cradling her the way I'd cradle my daughter if she were scared. And part of me was standing between those two and the harpies—a warrior queen defending her people from shrieking, fear-mongering, spiteful, wing-flapping hags. That part of me was wielding a sword—the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God—which she had drawn from its sheath in the belt of truth. I had learned a few things in the year since I'd had that epiphany in Margie's spiritual direction room, and they were slowly seeping into my heart, slowly becoming the truth I lived by, and I knew that the only way to get rid of the harpies was to grab them by the throat and look them in the eye and fight their lies and and half-truths and less-than-half-truths with Truth:

- God never discourages. “Take heart,” Jesus said. To take heart means to have courage. The God who commands us to fear not, to take heart would never discourage us.

- God's voice is never a voice of condemnation. Conviction, yes, but never condemnation. These accusing, condemning voices drive me into myself. God wants to draw me out of myself.
- These voices scream and shrill and harp and ridicule. God speaks in a still, small voice. God is gentle and does not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick.
- God loves me. And these voices definitely do not.

That was my last big battle with the harpies. Oh, they flap around a bit every now and again, especially when I'm tired or stretched too thin, but I'm more adept at spotting them now, so they can't make the inroads they used to. They can't blind me with their lies. They can't curve me in on myself in fear and trembling—because I know that God loves me and upholds me and strengthens me.

That is Habit 3: silence the harpies. They will kill you if they can—and God is not willing that any of His children should perish. When the harpies start clamoring in your head, cut out their tongues. They are not you.

And they are certainly not God. Cut them off. They cause us to turn inward, to live in fear. And God says, "Fear not!" God says, "Come forth!" God says, "I love you, and nothing can separate you from My love."

Say it with me, friends: God loves me.

*God* loves me.

God *loves* me.

God loves *me*.

Say it till you believe it.

Say it till you receive it.

Say it till it settles in your bones and becomes the deepest reality you know.

## **Habit 4: Lash Yourself to the Mast**

(Or, You are Loved)

I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know His love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure with all the fullness of God.

—Ephesians 3:17-19

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

—1 John 4:18

We were late for library story time. Again. We were always late. For everything. As I pulled into the parking garage—it was almost always full at story time—I started praying for a parking spot. And God heard my cry and listened to my supplication. There was one spot left. Blazoned across the concrete floor of the garage in the middle of this spot was the word “compact.”

I drive a minivan.

But I was going to park in that space if it was the last thing I ever did because we...were...late! I nosed into the spot and backed out of it and nosed in and backed out and nosed in and backed out and nearly smashed the passenger side mirror into one of the concrete support posts and swore, loudly.

My daughter, who was five at the time and ever the helpful child, ventured to tell me that there was now another spot available and maybe I should try to park in it instead?

“Shut *up!*” I barked. “Don’t talk to me right now! Can’t you see I’m trying to park?!?”

Many years have passed since this incident, but I could tell you a hundred—or maybe a thousand—stories very like this one, stories in which I was anxious and harried, hurried and angry and unkind. That was the story of my life. Oh, sure, I had moments that weren’t rushed, but the overwhelming reality of my life was that I was usually somewhere else—or feeling like I ought to be somewhere else, doing something else. I wanted to be present in my life—and sometimes, thank God, I managed to be—but mostly I felt like I didn’t have time; there was simply too much to do. No matter where I was or what I was doing, it wasn’t where I was supposed to be or what I was supposed to be doing, and I felt anxious and hassled and frustrated and guilty.

I was wrecking on the rocks of all the shoulds clamoring for my attention—because I wasn’t lashed to the mast.

\*\*\*\*\*

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus, on his way home from the Trojan War, meets with all kinds of perils and adventures, one of which is the island of the sirens whose song, he’s been warned, is so irresistible that on hearing it men fling themselves from their boats in their mad desire to reach the singers—only to be dashed by the waves against the cruel rocks of the island’s shore. Their bones lie bleached on those rocks, a testimony to the danger of the sirens’ song.

Odysseus, being who he is, decides he’s going to have it both ways: he’s going to listen to the siren’s song and he’s not going to die doing it. He gives his men wax to plug their ears so they can’t hear the song and orders them to tie him with thick rope to the mast of the ship and not to unbind him for any reason whatsoever until they are well past the island of the sirens. His scheme

works—he gets to hear the sirens, and though he desperately tries to break his bonds to heed their call, his men cannot hear his cries to be unbound, and they row to safety. Lashing himself to the mast saved his life.

There are sirens in contemporary life, and they are every bit as alluring and deadly as the ones Odysseus heard. One of them is the siren of busyness. Another is the siren of hurry. Still another is the siren of restlessness, or acedia, that insists real life is happening somewhere else. I'm sure you can think of plenty more. These sirens lure us away from the safety of our boats and wreck us on their rocks. I lived my life for years, decades even, in wretched response to their lying clamor.

But not anymore. Now I know to lash myself to the mast. As a Christian, my mast is Jesus. I have to stay close to Him—I have to stay beyond close. I have to remain in Him. Of course I do. He Himself said, “Abide in my love. Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15). Indeed, apart from Him, I will die, wrecked on the rocks of the sirens.

I wish I could remember what started me lashing myself to the mast on a daily basis, but I don't. Maybe it grew gradually out of other practices. However it came about, it seems to me this is *the foundational practice* for a happy life, and it's very simple.

All you have to do is get yourself alone for a few minutes in a relatively quiet place (this may be the hardest part, yes?). Hide yourself in your closet or your bathroom if you have to. Sit in your car in the garage or a parking lot. Whatever it takes. I like to sit cross-legged and face east, toward the rising sun—to remind me of the risen Son—but this isn't necessary.

Once you're alone in a quiet(ish) place, close your eyes and take several deep breaths.

With each inhale, I imagine that I am breathing in the love of God. I imagine that love filling me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

With each exhale, I ask God to take everything in me that would block His love. I exhale my fear, anxiety, anger, pride, perfectionism, envy, self-righteousness, self-pity, scorn—anything and everything that restricts the flow of His love in my life, all that prevents me from receiving and living in His love (and it living in me!).

Sometimes I imagine Jesus before me, breathing on me as He breathed on His disciples—“Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). I imagine I am inhaling the Spirit that Jesus exhales.

That’s it. Simple, right?

But not easy. My thoughts are unruly and wander all over the place. I start thinking about other things and forget to consciously and deeply inhale and exhale. I start composing essays and stories in my head. I remember that I have to do X or Y today or that I forgot to do X or Y yesterday, and suddenly I feel anxious and harried.

Every time I become aware (that’s the gap of Habit 1) that my thoughts have wandered away from Jesus and are striking out on the waves for the island of the sirens, I take a deep breath and once again consciously inhale the love of God. I exhale the distracting thoughts into Jesus’ hand. Sometimes I ask Him to burn them up in the fire of His holy love. If I find myself chastising myself for being so distracted, I give those thoughts to Jesus, too—they just get in the way of receiving His love—and take another deep, full breath, inhaling the Holy Spirit in whom I live and move and have my being. I’ve found it helpful to pray Scripture as I consciously breathe in God’s love for me. (A few of my favorite verses are listed in the appendix.)

In Habit 2, we talked about how God surrounds us like an atmosphere, like air. Just as the air around us enters our bodies and gives us life when we breathe it in, so too, Christ lives in us and gives us life when we breathe Him in. Lashing myself to the mast makes me aware of this reality. I’m always breathing, but I’m not always aware that I’m breathing. Christ is always with me and

within me—but I'm not always aware of His presence. Taking full, deep, conscious breaths in which I imagine I am breathing in His love and mercy and grace—this helps me to remain present to the fact of His presence. It helps me to live more fully right where I am. It helps me to be happy right where I am because it helps me to see that God is present and active, right here, right now.

That's Habit 4: lash yourself to the mast. Start every day with a deep breath of God's love. During the day when you realize you're feeling anxious or harried (Habit 1) or the harpies are breathing down your neck (Habit 3), stop and take a deep breath. Remember you live in Christ (Habit 2), and breathe in His love like oxygen—because like oxygen, it is the vivifying force of your life. Over time, you will be surprised by the joy you find because you're abiding in Christ.



## Habit 5: Lift Up Your Head (Or, You Are Forgiven)

Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me. Thou art my glory and the lifter of my head.

—Psalm 3:3

Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

—Psalm 24:7

It was the beginning of my first school year teaching all four of my children at home, and we were still working out the various hiccups in our schedule. My twins needed to learn to read and write. My daughter had forgotten most everything she knew about multiplying multiple digit numbers. My oldest had slipped back into old habits of inattention and distractibility. And we were all still getting our bearings with the new school-year schedule and its far more structured and rigorous demands than our summer schedule.

As I managed the chaos and confusion and the conflicting needs of my children, God's transforming work in my life was patently evident to me—I was far more patient than I ever could have been a year or even six months before.

Still, my long history of anger, impatience, and anxiety had created habits that were deeply rooted in my brain and body, so while I marveled at the patience I often exhibited, I also sometimes fell back into those old habits. When the conflicting demands on my attention

became imperious, or when I was tired, and especially when both happened on the same morning, I would become increasingly frazzled until by lunchtime, I was fried.

One noontime, Jane was still struggling with her math, I was trying to get lunch on the table, my twins were whining about how hungry they were, and Jack was finishing his writing.

“Mama,” Jane wailed. “I don’t understand!”

Luke said, “I’m hungry!”

I brought sandwiches and carrots and a jar of applesauce to the table.

Jack slid his essay across the table to me. “Can you read this?”

Ben said, “I want yogurt with my applesauce.”

Jane said, “I need help with my math! I don’t understand!”

Suddenly it was all too much, and I snapped. I grabbed Jane’s math book and slammed it shut. I took it to the kitchen and slammed it on the counter. I yanked open the refrigerator, grabbed the yogurt, took it to the table, and slammed it down in front of Ben. “There!” I barked.

Then I stalked to the kitchen, squatted on the floor in front of the dishwasher, wrapped my arms around my shins, rested my forehead on my knees, and felt simultaneously very sorry for myself and very angry with myself. The harpies started to sing and purr with glee. *Poor sad tired tired sad sad you. What a wretch, stomping around like that, slamming books and food around like that. Taking the stuff that you feed your children’s minds and bodies with and turning it into weapons of anger. Shame on you.*

But I had been practicing Habit 3 (silencing the harpies) and Habit 4 (lashing myself to the mast). I knew those voices weren’t God’s. I knew God loved me, even in the midst of my bad behavior. So I asked myself, *If God were to say something to me right now, what would He say?*

Immediately words of comfort and love flooded my mind: *Kimberlee, I love you. I am right here with you. My arms are around*

*you. My grace is sufficient for you right here, right now.*

My head snapped up from where it had been resting on my knees. I blinked away the tears in my eyes. God loved me. He was holding me. I was not alone in this mess of a day, this mess of *me*. I unfolded myself and stood up. I took a deep breath, inhaling the love of God who promised never to leave me or forsake me. I expelled a deep breath, surrendering all the stress, chaos, anger, impatience, self-pity, and self-loathing I was feeling into the hands of Jesus to do with as He pleased. Apparently He pleased to burn it all up in the fire of His holy love, for after a few moments I was able to go back to the dining room and apologize to my children, receive their forgiveness and their apologies, and enjoy eating lunch with them.

\*\*\*\*\*

This story contains several key pieces to understanding and implementing the habits of silencing the harpies, lashing ourselves to the mast, and lifting up our heads. It shows the beginning stages of changing that soundtrack in my head from one of condemnation (silencing the harpies) to one of unconditional love (lashing myself to the mast). When we are ashamed of ourselves or our actions (and sometimes we should be), Jesus doesn't double down on us and drive the shame deeper into us. No! He came and lived and died and rose again so we would not have to live with the shame of our own wrong-doing. He asks us to give Him our shame so He can crucify it and set us free from it and replace it with His love!

In order to do this (or let Him do it), we must stop cowering in the corners of our kitchens and our souls. St. Augustine called this curled up posture *incurvatus in se*, a Latin phrase that literally means curving in on one's self. Most of us live most of our lives in this posture. It is the posture of the woman in Luke 13. Perhaps you remember her story?

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. (Luke 13:10-13)

Like this woman, we are bent over and curved inward. “Sin,” Simone Weil once wrote, “is not a distance from God; it is a turning of our faces in the wrong direction.” *Incurvatus in se* is the wrong direction: we are looking not at Jesus and what He has done, but at ourselves and what we have done. For some people this looks like curling up in a ball in the corner of whatever room you’re in and giving in to thoughts of self-pity and self-condemnation and self-hatred. For others it looks like a sly, admiring grin in the mirror and thoughts of self-aggrandizement and self-congratulation.

Regardless of what it looks like, the focus is on self. And that is the wrong direction. When we focus on ourselves, we become the only thing that we can see. Every injury and insult looms large when all we can see is ourselves. All our faults and flaws and failings get magnified as in a funhouse mirror. Even our good points get distorted and end up betraying us.

When I find myself spinning in my thoughts in a cycle of self-focus—whether that’s visions of grandiosity and grandeur or a death spiral of self-pity and self-loathing—I find it helpful to stand up straight, take a deep breath, and stretch out my arms. This posture is the opposite of *incurvatus in se*. It’s the posture of Jesus on the cross, His arms stretched wide to embrace the world. In this posture, I can look up—and see Jesus. I can look out—and see my neighbor. The one person I don’t see in this posture—is myself.

The woman who was bent over for 18 years, unable to straighten herself, lived in her body what many of us live in our spirits, and whatever else that story is about, it is also about Jesus healing us from being curved in on ourselves. He longs to straighten us up—to straighten us out—so that we can live with our arms wide in embrace and praise, our heads up, and our eyes on Him.

Lifting up our heads allows us to see Jesus clearly, and in seeing Him we can see ourselves and our own situation clearly:

- We see that we are not alone, that Our Lord shields and shelters us (Habit 2).
- We see that the voices of condemnation are lying harpies (Habit 3).
- And we see that we are deeply and unconditionally loved (Habit 4).

It is almost impossible to see any of this, let alone receive it, when we are curled into a tight little ball inside ourselves. Instead, we must lift up our heads and look at Jesus—for when we look at Him we see the perfect love that casts out fear, and we are in a posture to receive that love.

That is Habit 5: lift up your head. I mean that literally. Stand up straight, square your shoulders, fling wide your arms, and raise your face to the sun. Or rather, the Son, the King of glory who comes—to you.

## Habit 6: Say Thank You (Or, You Are Blessed)

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

—Psalm 107:1

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

—1 Thessalonians 5:18

In the midst of an overly full October—two birthdays, a road trip to see my parents, a church play, and a few other things on top of all the usual fullness of life with four children—one afternoon stands out. It was the Thursday before the play, in which both I and my kids were to perform. That morning we did our usual school routine, but then the afternoon was blessedly free, a gift in the midst of a very full month.

Late in the afternoon, my oldest son came into my bedroom where I was snatching a few moments to catch up on email. “I’m going to make tea,” he announced, “and then I’ll bring it upstairs and we can run through our lines.”

“Great,” I said, only half-listening.

Ten minutes later, he came up bearing a tray laden with cups, saucers, the teapot and creamer, and a plate of buttered toast. He and his siblings piled on my bed, and we drank tea and munched toast while we ran through our lines and practiced our songs for the church

play, and then we chatted and the kids told silly jokes and we laughed together until it was time to begin our evening routine of chores, dinner, stories, and bed. So we piled off the bed and downstairs, scattering to our various duties.

Later that evening, I remembered that cozy time of togetherness and realized it was one of the sweetest hours of an already delightful day. In some ways, it was nothing special, but that's part of what made it special—that this is my life, these moments of camaraderie with my children or my husband, or all of us together. And I marveled. Who is this glad and grateful woman living in my body?

Anyone who's known me for any length of time knows that my life used always to hang in the balance and be found wanting. But the practice of these habits I've been sharing with you has transformed my vision. As I cast the circle and become increasingly lashed to the mast, as I lift up my head more often, I find that my life is anchored to something—Someone!—permanent and abiding, which allows me to feel spacious rather than harried, which in turn makes it possible for me to be more present and pay closer attention, to really see the good gifts God has lavished upon me—such good gifts as eyes to see and ears to hear and a mouth to sing (and laugh!) and people to love and be loved by.

The final habit I am going to share with you is actually the first habit I adopted, ten years ago now. It is the habit of saying thank you, and its practice is what eventually made it possible for me to see and receive the other habits, which had been staring me in the face all along.

At the time that I began to say thank you, I felt my life was unfair. My dreams of being an up-and-coming young author were rapidly wrecking on the rocks of reality: my first book, which I'd imagined would be a harbinger of good things to come, had sold poorly; my novel, six years in the making, had been rejected by 19



agents; and I had a stack of magazine rejection letters an inch and a half thick. And I was unexpectedly pregnant—with twins.

Life felt hard and dark. Even looking back, that fall and winter seem shrouded in dark fog, like I was always living in twilight. In a way, I was. Everything was a battle. I was Paul kicking against the goads. I was a Pharisee rejecting the cornerstone. Life was not turning out the way I expected, much less the way I wanted. And I was mad. And I felt simultaneously guilty for being mad. Enter the harpies. *Who do you think you are? Why should you have a good life anyway? You're such a spoiled princess.* My thoughts swung like a pendulum between self-importance and self-loathing.

But as I practiced saying thank you, slowly, slowly my gaze shifted from myself to God. It's still shifting in that direction. I still too often have one or both eyes on myself, but God in His mercy continues to draw me out of this posture of *incurvatus in se* and into the freedom and fullness of life in His kingdom. Saying thank you was the first step out of myself and into the wideness of God's mercy and goodness.

Though I didn't know it ten years ago when I embraced this habit, saying thank you is a posture of humility. Humility is the opposite of *incurvatus in se*. It is a recognition that all I have and all I am is sheer gift. Not earned, not achieved, not born of my own making or doing or striving or manipulating. Given. And gifts presuppose a Giver. To receive a gift, I must unfold myself, open my hands, my eyes, my arms, my heart.

Saying thank you opened my eyes to this reality: that life is a gift. My life. The life of this world. It opened my mind to the Reality of Emmanuel, God-with-us, as the basic fact of existence: the All who always is all everywhere. It opened my heart to receive His love which I had so steadfastly refused.

These days my vista is more or less the same as it was eight years ago—my kids are older, which brings its own joys and challenges; I live in a different house in a different town, which has perks and

drawbacks; and my writing career continues to be something that can't really be called a career—but my vision has shifted radically. Saying thank you was the first step toward living with my head up and my arms wide (Habit 5), my whole being lashed to the mast of Jesus's love (Habit 4), which surrounds me as with a shield (Habit 2). These days I see the joy more than the challenges, the perks more than the drawbacks, and the manifold gifts of not having the writing career I used to dream of. And I am thankful.

I am beyond thankful. I am downright giddy at the ways God has transformed my sight. Every day, I see God's goodness lavished upon me, mercy upon mercy, grace upon grace, gift upon gift—such good gifts as eyes to see and ears to hear and a mouth to sing (and laugh!) and people to love and be loved by.

That is Habit 6, friends: Say thank you. Don't force yourself to *feel* grateful. Simply notice something good or beautiful, and say thank you for it. Trust me, if you do this often enough, the feelings will follow.

## Further Up and Further In

It has been over four years since I wrote in my journal, “I want joy.” It has been over three years since I realized my anxiety levels had dropped through the floor, thanks to the practice of these habits and the grace of God. Or perhaps, the grace of God working through these habits.

In the intervening years, I decided I was healthy enough to tackle graduate school on top of my usual work of homeschooling my children and teaching in our homeschool co-op. It has been intense, friends, and I have had to lean hard on these habits, which means I am leaning hard on God. Amazingly, despite the stress that in former years would have been a recipe for anxiety and paralysis, I have been able to do the work before me with perseverance and even joy.

That said, a confession is in order. In the exhaustion at the end of the school year, I tried to rest on my oars: I got sloppy in the practice of these habits for a few weeks. I figured I’d been practicing them for so long, I would be okay. And I was, for about a week. But the current of my life still drifts toward anxiety unless I am actively rowing. Mostly that’s because of the harpies. They were just waiting for me to let my guard down, and as soon as I did, they were ready with insinuating, condemning words that drove me right back into myself. They have no grace and show no mercy, and since they shape-shift, it took me awhile to realize what was going on.

And that is what happens unless I’m actively immersed in God’s love. In the end, that’s what all the habits are about: they’re ways to remember that God loves me, that I live surrounded and upheld and

indwelt by the God who is Love, who sees and knows and loves me. In a way, I am grateful for those few weeks' reminder of what I become when God leaves me to myself, for it reminded me to cling to Him, made me want to stay lashed to the mast of His love.

Hannah Whitall Smith says that the Christian's secret to a happy life is "to be infinitely passive, and yet infinitely active also; passive as regards self and its working, active as regards attention and response to God." For me, attention and response to God mean I must daily mind the gap, cast the circle, silence the harpies, lash myself to the mast, lift up my head, say thank you. I don't have to do any of it perfectly (which is a good thing, because I never do), but I do have to do it.

And when I do, when I am faithful to practice these habits, I am happy. I know joy and peace. I know by experience that those who abide in Christ know the truth and the truth shall set them free, because the truth is that God loves us with a perfect love, a love that casts out all fear.

As I enter more deeply into these habits, I find I am ever more thankful—no longer as a discipline but as an expression of genuine joy and wonder, a response of praise for the amazing gift of transformation God has wrought in me. I give Him the little loaves and fishes of these six habits, and He blesses my efforts and multiplies them beyond all I could ask or imagine.

I hope and pray that as you practice the six habits I've shared with you in these pages that you, too, will experience what I have experienced; that you, too, will be set free from anxiety and know peace and joy that you never dreamed was possible.

## Appendix: Meditate on the Love of God

The following are some of my favorite Scripture verses and passages for remembering that I am God's beloved child, that His view of me is where I find my identity, and that His love is stronger and deeper than any condemnation I (or others) may heap upon me.

I strongly suggest that you memorize many of these—or other favorite passages that remind you of your belovedness. When we have these words memorized, we can meditate on God's love anytime, anywhere. More, these words, called to mind over and over again, replace the soundtrack of fear and anxiety in our minds.

In most of these passages, I have adapted the words of Scripture so that they are addressed *to* God (rather than talking *about* God). I have found this helps me not just to think the words but to pray them.

Behold, what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called children of God—and that is what we are!

—1 John 3:1

I pray that You would root me and ground me in Your love, that I may have power to comprehend, with all the saints, how wide and long and high and deep is Your love for me, and to know Your love that surpasses knowledge, so that I may be filled to the measure with all the fullness of You.

—Ephesians 3:17-19

I pray that Your love would abound in me more and more in knowledge and depth of insight that I may be able to discern what is excellent and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ Jesus, filled with the fruit of Your righteousness, to the glory and praise of You.

—Philippians 1:9-11

I pray that I would abide in Your love, Jesus, that You would graft me into Your vine so that Your love may flow in my veins and enable me to bear Your fruit, so I may be filled with the fullness of Your joy, and may glorify Your Father and mine.

—John 15:1, 5, 8-9

O Lord, you tend Your flock like a shepherd; You gather the lambs in Your arms and carry them in Your bosom and gently lead those who are heavy-laden. Carry me in Your everlasting arms, Lord. Hold me in Your arms of love.

—Isaiah 40:11

O Lord, my God, You are in my midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
you rejoice over me with gladness,  
You renew me in Your love;  
You exult over me with loud singing.

—Zephaniah 3:17

But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
Your steadfast love never ceases, O Lord,  
Your mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is Your faithfulness.

—Lamentations 3:21-23

O God, You are love. You are patient and kind. You do not envy or boast. You are not arrogant or rude. You do not insist upon Your own way. You are not irritable or resentful. You do not rejoice at wrong-doing but rejoice in the truth. You bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. You never end.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-8

O Lord, You are my shepherd. I shall not want.

You make me lie down in green pastures.

You lead me beside quiet waters.

You restore my soul.

You lead me in paths of righteousness for Your name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

—Psalm 23

Thus says the Lord, he who created you:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.”

—Isaiah 43:1-4

The word of the Lord:

“Do not fear, for I am with you.

Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you. I will help you.

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

—Isaiah 41:10



## About the Author

K. C. Ireton is the author of *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year*, recently re-released in a 10th anniversary edition, and *Cracking Up: A Postpartum Faith Crisis*. She's written for various print journals, including *Books & Culture*, *Christian Reflection*, and *Weavings* and has been a contributing writer for numerous websites including Godspace, Grace Table, and Velvet Ashes and is currently a contributing editor at The Cultivating Project.

She writes a more-or-less monthly letter about books, faith, and finding God in the ordinary. If you'd like to receive it, you can sign up on her website: [kcireton.com](http://kcireton.com).

*Anxious No More: Six Habits for a Happy Life*

© 2019 K. C. Ireton

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover Art: "Faith" by Faye Hall ([www.fayehall.com](http://www.fayehall.com)). Used by permission.