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A MESSAGE FOR AN AGE OF ANXIETY

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Alan W. Watts, who held both a master's degree in theology and a doctorate of divinity, is best remembered as an interpreter of Zen Buddhism in particular, and of Indian and Chinese philosophy in general. Standing apart, however, from sectarian membership, he has earned the reputation of being one of the most original and "unrutted" philosophers of the twentieth century. Watts was the author of some twenty books on the philosophy and psychology of religion that have been published in many languages throughout the world, including the bestselling *The Way of Zen*. An avid lecturer, Watts appeared regularly on the radio and hosted the popular television series, *Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life*, in the 1960s. He died in 1973.

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A Message for an Age of Anxiety

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TO DOROTHY

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INTRODUCTION
by Deepak Chopra

Every book is a journey, but this one aims to travel everywhere and nowhere. It begins in a state of anxiety, which few people want to dwell on. It punches holes in shared belief and treats sacred things with irreverence and cocky quips. As if to ensure its failure, Alan Watts also proposes a paradox that being insecure is a malady of the psyche and at the same time an open door to an invisible reality, the only place where the cures for fear and anxiety will ever be found.

Yet with all these elements going against it, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, which was published in 1951, has found many spellbound readers, and I'm proud to call myself one.

In my mid-thirties, about the same age as the author was when the book was published, I found in Watts the perfect guide for a course correction in life, away from materialism and its empty promises. The new course headed into the most elusive territory one can imagine: the present moment. Here and now, Watts declared, lies the experience of the universe in its totality. "If happiness always depends on something expected in the future, we are chasing a will-o'-the-wisp that ever eludes our grasp, until the future, and ourselves, vanish into the abyss of death." A typical Alan Watts pronouncement, sweepingly ambitious, offering help at the price of subverting everything the reader holds dear. For in postwar America, life was all about progress and the lure of tomorrow. Where were we headed? First to the moon and one day the stars. How much could we achieve? Everything. What would success bring us? Riches and contentment that

could never be taken away. Watts was the gadfly who pricked us out of our sleep. Progress was a sham, he said, and dreaming about tomorrow was pure escapism from the pain we fear today. What is popularly called “the power of now” was being addressed fifty years before its time.

Looking back, one realizes that Watts was a spiritual polymath, the first and possibly greatest of that type. He read omnivorously in philosophy, religion, psychology, and science—a sponge with a hundred arms, so to speak. He produced this little book at a turning point in his personal life. It was 1951, and he had just lost his vocation as an Episcopal priest, along with his young wife in a divorce. He had been following a longtime fascination with Zen Buddhism, leading him to spend his seminary years trying to fuse Eastern and Western mysticism. In the classic arc of coming-of-age tales, he was finally about to find himself. But he would do it in the strangest way, by declaring that there was no self to find. Lasting happiness—the underlying quest in almost all of Watts’s copious writing—can only be achieved by giving up the ego-self, which is a pure illusion anyway. The ego-self constantly pushes reality away. It constructs a future out of empty expectations and a past out of regretful memories.

As Watts formulates it, in his brisk, deceptively simple style: “… tomorrow and plans for tomorrow can have no significance at all unless you are in full contact with the reality of the present, since it is in the present and only in the present that you live.” Like a good preacher, he sounds emphatic and connected to a higher truth. But the message was too pushy and barbed for a comfortable Episcopal pulpit. Imagine any believing Christian, who cherishes the reward of Heaven and the second coming of Christ, hearing these words: “There is no other reality than present reality, so that, even if one were to live for endless ages, to live for the future would be to miss the point everlastingly.” With swift jabs Watts demolishes the afterlife and dashes any hope that there is a better world to come.

Watts was alone in the wilderness back then. For an eccentric to dabble in Eastern thought was acceptable in his native England. Because it possessed India and strong footholds in China, England produced some minds who were willing to delve deeper into Vedanta and Buddhism than the usual blinkered colonialist. But America was different. No one needed to hear from an upstart who fancied himself the Pied Piper of all things spiritual (Watts’s own self-description was “philosophical entertainer,” although he was much more than that). But as I revisit the arguments offered so boldly