

an excerpt from

*Three Deep Breaths*

*Finding Power and Purpose in a Stressed-Out World*

by Thomas Crum

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## The Wrinkle

He probably never would have looked at his reflection at all, if it hadn't been for something his daughter said. He would have done what he usually did—go downstairs, get on his computer, and wrestle with deadlines and dilemmas. But tonight, while he was tucking her into bed, Angus noticed Sierra looking at him intently.

“Why do you have that big line on your face, Daddy?”

“What big line?”

“This big line here,” she said, tracing with her finger a line on his brow that extended down between his eyes.

“I guess it's from worrying too much,” was Angus's truthful reply.

“What are you going to do?” his daughter persisted.

“I'm not sure.”

He kissed her good night and reached to turn off the light.

“When I'm not sure of something I just ask my teacher.”

“That's a good idea, Sierra. Now, go to sleep,” he said, closing her bedroom door.

“And my teacher says the answers are always there, Daddy,” he heard her call out. “You just have to look for them.”

That was when he caught his reflection in the hallway mirror.

It answered back unflinchingly.

Behind that professional demeanor and that successful-looking suit, that crisply pressed shirt and silk tie, lurked something Angus didn't like. Something unnerving, like driving a car with loose brakes. The headset from his cell phone was still dangling around his neck, keeping him connected, but connected to what? He focused in on his tired eyes and the wrinkles on his brow. So this was the result of all this striving for success. Angus put both hands on the little table under the mirror to get a closer look. Sure, he had a good job, a loving wife, a wonderful eight-year-old daughter, a nice home. Wasn't he supposed to be happy? What was this miserable feeling and what was behind this sad and bewildered face?

The image didn't look at all like the person he wanted to be. He saw right through the efficient business-suit exterior to the stressed-out, "no time available" man he had become.

*What are you going to do about it?* he thought. The mirror, Zen-like, reflected back only his confusion.

Angus's cell phone rang, but for once he did not answer it.

*Oh, I'm connected all right! PDA, cell phone, Internet, fax messages, 500 cable channels, the whole cyberspace nightmare! You would think if anybody had access to the answers it would be me. But I'm just like everybody else, walking around with a headset on, appearing to be mumbling to myself. It used to be if we were on the street talking to ourselves, we were considered crazy.*

If only there were a delete button for dastardly days. Or maybe a do-over one. What was worse, this had been just a typical day for Angus. It had started with the alarm clock

jack-hammering the billion neurons of his brain into consciousness. He had reached up in such a knee-jerk stupor that he knocked the clock off the table onto the hardwood floor, dividing it into two clocks, neither of them working. *Alarm.* That was the perfect start for Angus's day—frenzied—like fire ants in his boxers.

Had he set the alarm for an hour earlier, he would still have sabotaged himself. Some people travel in the fast lane, some are stuck in the slow lane. Angus was stuck in the *late* lane. Even when he planned extra time, he would squander it away in the shower in a hypothetical debate, bullying one of his colleagues into accepting one of his ideas, until the hot water ran out. Then he would notice the time, and the panic would begin anew.

Angus had rushed through the kitchen and kissed his daughter with the early morning pleasantries, "Sierra, I'm going to make it to your soccer game this afternoon." He went to kiss his wife, Carly, but his cell phone rang, so he answered it instead.

"Hello? Yeah, hello, Robert. Oh yeah? I figured that would happen. I'm surrounded by idiots, that's what I think of it."

Grabbing his coffee mug, he had rushed out the door with an affirmative grunt to his wife's query, "Coffee for breakfast again?" Carly could only sigh, looking down at the eggs she was about to scramble and then helplessly at her daughter.

"Sierra, he's just really busy these days. He's got big challenges at work. Don't be disappointed if he misses another game." She managed a smile for her daughter, and then quickly looked back at her eggs, disguising her own frustration.

But of course, Angus had missed the importance of that moment. He was deeply lost in the oblivion of the preoccupied, roaring down the highway, talking in his annoyed business voice to Robert on his cell phone, jacked up on coffee and anxieties, acting like an NFL linebacker blitzing on third down.

“All right, Robert. We’ve got problems. I’ll be there soon.”

He slammed the cell phone shut.

“Don’t! Don’t you dare!” he screamed at the traffic light turning red. *The longest red light in the city, and I have to get it.*

He had taken another gulp of his java while simultaneously flicking on the radio and dialing his office assistant on his cell phone. Angus could multitask with the best of them, a skill essential to the chronically late.

“Hi, Kelly. If Sterner gets in for our meeting before I do, tell him I’m on my way. I’m stuck in a major traffic jam!” A lie, of course, but not from his perspective. Everything was *always* major.

“What’s that, Kelly? What does Harold want? A meeting tomorrow? Okay, okay, tell him I’ll be there. See if you can free up my schedule.”

Harold was his boss.

That’s when Angus had started to sweat. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. *Isn’t this red light ever going to change?* He could feel his heart pounding. Then he did that thing he always did under stress. He escalated. He took one worry (*Why does the boss want to see me?*) and created a catastrophic scenario around it (*I’m over budget, I’m not meeting deadlines, I’ll get fired, Carly and Sierra will disown me, I’m going to die*). He had perfected this apocalyptic spiral of despair: he was a world-class down-hiller on a slippery slope.

Angus had been eyeing Eddy, the homeless guy who worked the red-light traffic for loose change. This had always irritated Angus and today it downright killed him. He wanted to yell, "Hey, Eddy, how about lending *me* a buck? You're even, and I'm down \$18,000 in credit card debt!" But the light turned green, so Angus jumped on the horn instead.

The guy in the red truck in front of him made the obligatory gesture, which caused Angus, with a maniacal gleam, to accelerate around him, barely making the right-hand turn onto the freeway. He screeched to a halt behind the slow line queuing up for the freeway entrance. He had saved no time whatsoever, but to him, he had just sacked the quarterback.

But then came the guilt, the remorse, the worry: *Somebody could have gotten hurt and it would have been my fault.* Anger one minute, guilt the next.

He eventually wheeled into the packed company parking lot, smoldering as he looked for a space. He noticed one up front near his building, as well as a car approaching from the opposite direction with its blinker on. Another quick acceleration and Angus casually swerved into the space before the car could make the turn. It was rude, he knew, so he feigned innocence, although in the rear-view mirror he recognized the driver as an elderly woman who worked in his building.

*At least it's not a fellow employee. I'm late and I need the space. This is an emergency.*

He grabbed his briefcase and ran to the building.

"Mornin', Angus," came the happy, singsong voice of Daisy, the groundskeeper, who had been watering some small fir trees.

*Some days that woman annoys me. Actually, most days. Doesn't she ever have a bad day?*

He gave her a professional nod of recognition.

There is just no graceful landing possible from a horizontal position three feet off the ground. The garden hose that tripped him, combined with the speed at which he was moving, launched him skyward like a wounded condor, arms and briefcase flapping for balance. And losing. Prone on the sidewalk and cursing, Angus gathered himself up and hobbled into the building before Daisy, a big, lovable woman capable of carrying the perplexed Angus easily over one shoulder, could get there to help.

“Whoa! That was some flight, Angus! Are you still in one piece?”

Without looking back, Angus waved her off. *Can this day get any worse?*

It did. But there is no need to describe the rest of the misery that Angus created. More pulse-racing battles with time, anxiety rushes, and ego-related tailspins, real and imagined.

Angus had hoped that he could relax at home that evening, but all he saw were rush-hour stand-stills, a hundred e-mails, a disappointed daughter whose soccer game he had missed, and a detached wife who had had about enough of his unavailability.

And that was when his daughter had said, “The answers are always there, Daddy. You just have to look for them.”

Angus found in the mirror the worry wrinkle that Sierra had pointed out. He traced it with his finger as if to erase it, but it did not go away. In this moment, for the first time, Angus recognized the truth of his situation.



## The Lift

Angus had a fitful night to match his day, this time fretting over his upcoming meeting with Harold, his boss. His conversation with his colleague Robert that morning confirmed a rumor he'd heard that his job as project manager for the new marketing plan was being questioned. Not just by his team, but by his boss. He had obsessed until he dozed off at 4:10 A.M., only to be jarred to attention by his daughter's alarm clock, which he had borrowed to replace the one he had broken the previous morning. The Disney tune was on full volume: "Zippity-do-dah, zippity ay."

*No, this is not a "wonderful day"!*

Fumbling unsuccessfully for the switch, he yanked the plug.

Angus rubbed his eyes and felt his tired body. He staggered to the shower and was drenched by a torrential downpour of warm water and cold thoughts. He stood aimlessly in the shower for who knows how long. It occurred to him that he was staring at his conditioner in his left hand, and couldn't remember whether he had shampooed or not. In his next fleeting glimpse of consciousness, he caught himself staring into the mirror holding his toothbrush but un-



clear as to whether or not he had brushed his teeth. Only the mint taste in his mouth gave him some confidence.

The next moment of awareness came while driving down his street. *Did I even see Carly and Sierra this morning?* The full coffee mug in his hand was an indicator that there had been an exchange, but the specifics were hazy.

If it is true that the world exists only in the present moment, then Angus's morning, full of ruminations about his upcoming meeting with his boss, had been nonexistent for all but an occasional blip on his screen of consciousness, usually associated with a gulp of caffeine.

The physical jolt of the car hitting the curb grabbed Angus's attention, causing him to grip the steering wheel tightly with both hands while grasping the thought that *yes*, he *was* driving by Hanford Park at 7:32 A.M., bumping along on a flat tire.

"No! No! Not today!" Angus raged as he pulled over alongside Hanford Park. He leaped out and saw the right back tire had been destroyed. Checking his watch and perspiring profusely, he opened the trunk and took out the jack. He got the lug nuts off and the car jacked up and went to grab the spare tire. He gave it a hopeful test bounce, but it replied with a splat.

Angus sank despondently to the curb, his determination and energy as flat as the spare tire he was staring at.

He pulled out his cell phone. "Kelly, it's me. Middle of rush-hour traffic and I'm sitting on the curb with a lug wrench in my hands, a flat tire, and a flatter spare. I'm a mess. If I look as crazed as I feel, I'd be arrested."

"I'm sorry, Angus," she replied kindly, and added, "But there is no hurry because Robert left a message saying he can't meet with you this morning."

*Robert! Messing me up again!*

Swelling with irritation, Angus jerked at his tie to loosen it.

“Why don’t you take a little time, Angus?” Kelly, his long-time assistant, was trying to be helpful. “It sounds like you need it. You want to be calm and clear for your meeting with Harold this afternoon. You know how important it is.”

“I know what I’m doing,” snapped Angus, and hung up. *I’m fuming, that’s what I’m doing.*

“You need a ride, sonny?”

He was startled by such a soothing sound; a breath of calm amid the rush-hour traffic. He turned in the direction of the voice. The first thing he noticed was the shoes—black, high-top Converse All Star basketball shoes, vintage early sixties. Then the gray sweat pants, classic old school with the baggy bottoms. Silver hair sprung out both sides of the man’s head under his baseball cap. With a fatherly smile and twinkling eyes the old man stood with both feet firmly planted and his hands on his hips, a hybrid of Albert Einstein and Vince Lombardi. He could have been forty or ninety: his dynamic physical presence spoke of youth, but his deep wrinkles could only have been carved by decades of laughing smiles and arduous miles. Hypnotized by the stunning sight, Angus tilted his head.

“Maybe I need to ask in another language?” the old man laughed.

“Oh, no. It’s just that, that, oh forget it,” Angus stammered. “Yes, I would appreciate a lift. I just need to make a phone call first.”

“Take your time.”

Angus tossed his spare tire and tools back into the trunk, and called his service station on his cell. He scribbled a

note, “Car repair truck on the way,” and placed it under the wiper.

That’s when Angus’s memory kicked in.

“Hey,” he said to the old man. “Aren’t you the guy I see doing those strange-looking movements in the park every morning?”

“Strange to you, maybe,” the old man laughed. “But very familiar to me. Something I learned from an old martial arts master, when I was the one who was needing a lift.”

The old man bounded into a baby blue, ’57 Chevy convertible in mint condition. Angus opened the car door and sat down. He blinked to clear his focus, and then looked at this strange being in the vintage hot-rod with a yin-yang symbol on the gearshift knob, a pair of fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror, and immaculate white leather upholstery.

“I’m Angus. Thanks for the lift.” His eyes toured the interior again. “This is some car.”

“It’s a good ride,” replied the old man. And then he said, looking at Angus with piercing blue eyes, “Are you clear about where you desire to go?”

If it had been a normal “where would you like to go” Angus’s response would have been immediate. He knew where the office was. He thought he knew where he was. Yet the old man’s choice of words, and the way he said “clear,” and “you,” and “desire” gave direction-finding an entirely new meaning.

“Someplace different from where I seem to be headed,” Angus sighed. Then he recovered with the more concrete, “I work at the Jefferson Building on Fourth and Federal.”

“Well then, let’s begin our journey. First, you need to fasten your centering belt.”

“My what?”

“Oh! I know you call it a seat belt. But for me it’s far more important than that.”

“Centering belt?” Angus asked, bewildered.

“Wise words,” the old man asserted.

“Weird words. The wisdom loses me.” But Angus realized that nothing in his life was making any sense these days, so why not continue down this strange road?

“Do you have ten minutes before we proceed?”

“Not really,” snapped Angus. “I’m a very busy man.” *Who does this guy think he is? Time is money. God, I hate not being in control, stuck, dependent on this old geezer who probably wants to sell me something useless.*

He watched the old man start up the engine without hesitation or argument, his peaceful demeanor unchanged.

*Okay, okay. My morning meeting has been canceled. And, well, maybe Kelly is right. I do need to pull myself together.*

“On second thought, why not?” Angus responded, annoyed at the situation. “I’ve got a few extra minutes.”

*First, You Need to Fasten*

*Your Centering Belt*





## The First Breath

Hanford Park was unusually empty on this crisp fall morning. They left the car and Angus followed the old man to a little opening among some aspen trees, adjacent to a pond where ducks happily paddled about before they headed south for the winter.

“I am a small, elderly man, wouldn’t you say?”

Before Angus could answer, the old man continued, “And you’re a big strong guy. I want you to lift me up off the ground.”

*Now what have I gotten into?* worried Angus, checking around anxiously to see if there were any observers.

“Use your legs so you don’t hurt yourself and lift me up.”

Angus glanced at his watch. *What possessed me to listen to this guy?*

Angus was a good six inches taller and seventy pounds heavier than the old man. He put his hands under the old man’s arms and easily lifted him a foot off the ground.

“Thank you. Now place me back down.”

Angus did as he was instructed, wondering about the sanity of the little man.

“I was right. You’re very strong! Now I’m not going to

change anything physically, and I don't want you to change how you lift. Simply pick me up again."

Annoyed, Angus repeated his procedures. This time, to his amazement, he couldn't budge the old man. It was like trying to pick up the front of the old Chevy. Or pulling up one of the aspen trees. It would have been ludicrous to continue trying. This little man had suddenly become like a mountain.

Flustered and challenged, Angus's competitive instinct took over.

"I wasn't focused," asserted Angus. "Let me try that again."

Angus lifted. Nothing moved.

After a third try, Angus felt his frustration change to curiosity. He nervously looked around the park to make sure he was anchored to reality.

"What happened?" Angus was confused.

"I got centered," the old man said, as if it were a natural thing.

"I don't know what that is, but you felt twice as heavy."

The old man laughed. "Did you see me pour a slab of concrete down my pants? Centering is not about weight. It's about relationship. If I am separate from this earth, I'm easily lifted off of it. If I am connected to it, ah, then it is the whole earth you have to move."

Angus wondered who had dropped the hallucinogens in his coffee that morning.

"Now, stand with your feet about shoulder width apart. Look straight ahead." The old man lightly placed his hand on Angus's chest, and gently pushed. Angus wobbled backwards.

"This is how people are most of the time. Wobbly, at the

effect of every little pressure, every little stress, with no center. Right now, you have no center.”

“How do I get one?” asked Angus, his cynicism melting into sincerity.

“It’s a journey,” the old man responded. “It starts in a very natural place: with your breathing.”

“My breathing?”

“Yes. See if you can relax and simply notice your breathing. Put your hands on your belly. Now watch and feel this area. You will notice it is vitally alive! In your natural state you will be breathing deeply from this area. On inhalation your belly will expand outwards. On exhalation the belly will recede toward the spine.”

Angus focused on his belly. Yes, it seemed to be moving. But his mind kept thinking about it rather than feeling it.

“I’m not sure I’m getting it.”

“This is a common difficulty. Most people breathe shallowly from the chest. Simply notice the process without trying to do anything. It’s like watching the ebb and flow of gentle waves on a beach. Try breathing through your nose. It will slow and deepen your breath. It might also help if you listen and follow the internal sound made as you breathe.”

After a few breaths, Angus began to relax and pay full attention to his breath without hurrying.

“I think I’m getting it. But I’m not sure what ‘it’ is.”

Angus couldn’t imagine that simply breathing this way could be so fulfilling. However, he was aware that he rarely breathed this way, deep and full.

The old man smiled.

“That is the beginning of your Centering Breath. When you do deep, centered breathing, breathing with awareness, you will bring vital oxygen to every part of your lungs, par-



ticularly the lower lobes of the lungs where the oxygen-to-blood transfer is most efficient. You bring balance and health to your entire nervous system. Continue for another minute or so, with full attention to this Centering Breath.”

After a few moments, Angus became acutely aware of his surroundings.

“Have those ducks been quacking since we got here?”

The old man smiled. “I can see by that question that you’re understanding more about this Centering Breath. It’s not just physical, not just relaxing and balancing the body. It’s also mental, bringing you greater awareness and mindfulness. You are becoming more present.

“Look at those aspen trees. Listen to the ducks. Feel this gentle breeze. Nature is presenting you the gift of its beauty. Breathe all of this in—the oxygen and the experience—all the way to your center.”

As he was saying this, he was lightly applying more pressure to Angus’s chest, but this time, Angus was balanced.

“This is the amount of pressure that made you wobble the first time.”

“No way!” Angus felt like a mountain. “I hardly feel any pressure now! Why? What am I doing?”

“You are becoming centered!” The old man let out another hearty laugh. “You don’t feel the pressure when you are centered. Now take whatever it is you were doing or experiencing—a feeling, an image, a sound—and capture it. Increase it. If it’s a picture, have it become more colorful and vivid. If it’s a feeling, deepen it. If it’s a sound, let it resonate at a higher quality. Simply intend, consciously choose, a more centered state.”

Angus clearly felt more stable than he had for some time, but his doubt overruled him. *It can’t be this easy, can it?*

“When you are ready, indicate with your hand and I will apply more pressure. I will apply it only gradually.”

Tentatively at first, Angus began to wave in more pressure. Within seconds the old man announced, “Now I’m giving you twice as much pressure. Now it’s three times. Now at least five times!”

Angus was not aware of the increase in pressure. He was too absorbed by the state of calm and presence that he felt. Moreover, he recognized that this feeling was not entirely new. It had occurred many times, in the simplest of moments, throughout his life. Simple images flooded back: he was a young child running through the shallow waves at the beach, or a young adult lying in a sleeping bag watching the Earth turn through the infinite starry canopy above. In those moments of mindfulness, as in this one, his analytical racing mind was less in the forefront of his consciousness, leaving his awareness clearer so the world could appear in the present moment, as it really is, fresh and vibrant. He was captivated by the revelation that he was an integral part of the world, not separate from it.

*Centering Is a Journey*

*That Starts with Breathing*

Finally, Angus said softly, “This is hard to believe. And all I’m doing is breathing deeply with awareness and looking at ducks.”

The old man laughed again. His laughter didn’t come superficially. It came from somewhere deep, an open-hearted, open-minded laugh, and the ducks and the aspen trees seemed to laugh with him. For the first time in a long time Angus felt relaxed and calm. The deep, full, deliberate breathing was surprisingly enjoyable.

After a while, the old man continued.

“Watch that cat sneaking up on that duck over there.”

Angus looked toward the pond, where a large cat was crouched twenty yards away from the duck resting in the grass.

“The duck and the cat, like all of us, are blessed with autonomic nervous systems, involuntary systems that keep the heart beating, the lungs breathing, the stomach digesting. The autonomic nervous system is made up of two complementary systems. One is the ‘fight-or-flight’ system and the other is the ‘rest-and-digest’ system.”

Suddenly the cat leaped into action—from total stillness to startling speed and power. Almost simultaneously, the young duck exploded from complete relaxation into a full sprint, running and flapping its wings furiously, barely making it to the pond, short a few feathers.

“A perfect example of the fight-or-flight system in action!” noted the old man. “It took hundreds upon hundreds of biochemical and neurological reactions to give them the endurance, strength, and power necessary to fight or flee. But look now.”

Angus observed the duck peacefully paddling about while the cat lounged under a tree.

“Now, the rest-and-digest system is turned on to rebuild and rejuvenate. When one nervous system is turned on, the other starts shutting down. Full recovery is possible.”

Angus nodded toward the road where they had met earlier and snarled, “It’s just the opposite with the madness over there.”

They watched the commuters in rush-hour traffic.

“You’re right, Angus. Some are late for work or consumed by negative thoughts and worries. They get fixated on some fear or imagined catastrophe, and at least metaphorically they think that their lives are at risk. They speak to their bodies in dire language like ‘I’m finished’ or ‘it’s all over’ or worse. The part of the human brain that is the headquarters of the autonomic nervous system has not evolved enough to make a distinction between death by saber tooth tiger and death by imaginary thoughts. So on goes the red alert switch—the fight-or-flight syndrome. Perspiration flows, eyes dilate, the sphincter and anus lock (which is a good thing!), the heart starts beating fast and hormones flood into the bloodstream preparing for the fight or flight. And the commuters just sit there! Hey! It’s useless to leap out of your car and bite the fender of the truck in front of you. And yet that is what the fight-or-flight nervous system is preparing you to do.”

“Is that why I get neurotic and a whole bunch of red flags on my blood test, while the animals over there by the pond don’t? Because I don’t get to burn off the chemicals in the fight or the flight?” Angus asked.

“That’s only part of the answer. Let’s say that despite all your rush-hour negative thoughts and distress, a miracle happens. When you get to your workplace, you find that everything is okay. You sit down at your desk and techni-

cally you could relax. The rest-and-digest system would get turned on, and it would rebuild and restore all of those chemicals released into the system. But the problem is that you don't relax, do you?"

"Heck, no. I'm only in the office for a few minutes before I get some call from a major client canceling her contract."

"Red alert!" smiled the old man.

"And then, just when you reconcile that, you get a memo from headquarters saying there is a company-wide layoff ahead."

"Red alert!" chuckled the old man. "And maybe you get through all of that mess successfully and can go home to relax. But you find yourself right back in rush-hour traffic. Red alert."

"Yeah, and then I finally make it home and there's spam in my mailbox, my daughter's sound asleep, and my wife has a headache! Red alert! Red alert! Red alert!"

"You got it. So what's the real problem? It's not the stress. Stress just is. Stress occurs when a significant change happens—mentally, physically, environmentally. It's part of our daily life—a river of change. The problem is that people today lack balance between the fight-or-flight system and the rest-and-digest system. We are on red alert far too much of the time."

"That's where centering comes in," the old man continued, with riveting intensity. "The autonomic nervous system is, for the most part, involuntary, meaning that it operates without your conscious involvement. For instance, it is difficult to consciously lower your blood pressure or immediately control your perspiration. But breathing is both involuntary and voluntary. Therefore, choosing deep cen-

## THE FIRST BREATH

tered breathing is one of the most powerful ways in which everyone can consciously and easily affect the autonomic nervous system. This centering provides you with a conscious choice. Deep centered breathing enables you to respond appropriately and mindfully, rather than react in a knee-jerk fight-or-flight manner when life doesn't go the way you want it to. Whenever you use this Centering Breath you bring balance and healing back.

“Now let's get you back to work.”

*Work!* Angus marveled at the thought.

“This is the first time work hasn't preoccupied my mind and made me crazy since I woke up this morning,” he said.

The old man put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him with compassion. “*Work* doesn't make you crazy. You choose that state.”

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