

Anxiety—genuine or spurious?

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Abstract

In this essay I use contemporary accounts, often journalistic, of the extremely anxious condition that young adults, “quarter lifers,” appear to be suffering in large numbers. Their anxiety is often characterized by a paralyzing inability to accomplish the most trivial seeming tasks, while nonetheless working successfully at their jobs. They express bitter disappointments about the state of their lives, when their dreams—framed largely by their parents—have failed to materialize. Why this rise in anxiety— not only in the numbers of diagnoses and treatments we are now seeing—but in young adults’ experience of it as a semi-permanent condition?

The answer lies in Freud’s somewhat difficult 1925 essay, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” in which Freud links *anxiety* with “animal phobias” and “agoraphobias.” Unlike with the other two neurotic indicators (inhibitions and symptoms), anxiety is not an unconscious repression of enjoyment. Instead anxiety stages a unique reenactment of both Oedipus and castration anxiety simultaneously: the anxious person is pulled by contrary impulses, wanting to earn the Father’s love by giving up Oedipal desires (out of fear of castration by the Father), and a unique return of Oedipus (desire to possess the Mother by wishing their Father dead). Freud’s example is Little Hans, he of the horse phobia. The agoraphobia of today’s young adults is prime example of anxiety as the psychical inability to leave home or live their life outside their parents’ restrictive and narrow version of what their child’s life “ought to be.”

Judging by the considerable number of prescriptions currently being written for it, *anxiety* appears to be *the* mental health crisis of our time (one person in five is now treated with drugs for anxiety or depression or both). The ascendancy of the disorder is further indicated by the plethora of journalistic explorations of it. There are entire organizations and websites devoted to addressing anxiety (e.g., anxietyuk.org.uk), even though the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* did not officially recognize it as a mental illness until 1980—around the same time several drugs for alleviating it became available. Anxiety is now considered a widespread and growing problem, centered largely on younger people, but also focused on issues in parenting as well as on sexual disorders.¹ It also appears that the stress is most prevalent among young adults, characterized as having

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¹ With great skepticism, Jacques-Alain Miller dismisses these types of anxiety as “constituted” –by psychotherapists and pharmaceutical discourse.

² There are even theories that the rise in anxiety is due to Donald Trump:

Donald Trump has made America’s mental health crisis much worse. Beginning with his presidential campaign and through to his third year as president, the United States has experienced an increase in anxiety, suicide, depression, and other mental health problems. The president of the United States is also a role model. His or her behavior influences the public. (Chauncey De Vega, *Salon*, February 13, 2019)

And that Trump’s presidency is cause for very real sex disorders: <https://www.rawstory.com/2019/02/post-trump-sex-disorder-real-thing-shockingly-pervasive-sex-therapist>.

“millennial burnout”² or “quarter life” crises (there is a journal called *Quarter Life* devoted to the problem).³ Earlier reports on the “anxiety crisis” in higher education in the US (2014) can also be found.⁴

News media are rife with therapeutic suggestions; one recommends folding clothes and linens as an everyday “anxiety-busting” chore.⁵ But a marked inability to complete the simplest chores (mailing a letter, washing the dishes) is also a prime indicator of increasing anxiety: one is able to work assiduously at one’s job, but is unable to complete even the smallest everyday errands.⁶ A wall poster recently advises filling your life “with little wins” –what better confession of an inability to enjoy life without seeing it as a game of win and lose, with every expectation of losing on the big things?

There have been other historical moments considered eras of “anxiety”: Soren Kierkegaard was moved to write on anxiety in the 1840s as Europe was undergoing the multiple small revolts that presaged the wider revolutions of 1848. The Danish philosopher noted among other things that anxiety always includes an element of

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>.

³ Julia Piskorz, “Me and my quarter-life crisis: a millennial asks what went wrong,” *The Guardian*, December 30, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/dec/30/me-and-my-quarter-life-crisis-a-millennial-asks-what-went-wrong>. It is the case that anxiety at the “quarter life” stage of young adulthood is hardly new—see John Milton’s *Sonnet VII* on his 23rd birthday:

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
 Stol'n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
 My hasting days fly on with full career,
 But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
 Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
 That I to manhood am arriv'd so near;
 And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
 That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.
 Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
 It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n
 To that same lot, however mean or high,
 Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n:
 All is, if I have grace to use it so
 As ever in my great Task-Master's eye.

⁴ John Warner, “The Anxiety Crisis,” *Inside Higher Education*, April 19, 2014 <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/anxiety-crisis-0-ixzz2zGRt1AeZ> (accessed March 21, 2019).

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/11/the-joy-of-folding-how-an-everyday-chore-became-an-online-anxiety-busting-sensation>.

⁶ Anne Helen Petersen, in *Buzzfeed*, January 9, 2019, coined the term “errand paralysis” where minor tasks such as going to the bank or returning an online order just feel impossible. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennial-burnout-perspectives>.

expectation or hope.⁷ Much less focused on any hopeful element to anxiety, we find two British poets on the eve of World War II, W H Auden (whose poem “The Age of Anxiety” Leonard Bernstein set to music in the wake of the Holocaust) and Louis MacNeice (“Autumn Journal”) who confronted the fraught sociopolitical conditions that defined the horizon of their existence. Auden’s poem even presaged many of today’s laments about how joyless the future threatened to be:

Odourless ages, an ordered world / Of planned pleasures and passport-control, /
Sentry-go sedatives, soft drinks and / Managed money, a moral planet / Tamed by
terror [...]

But it is also clear that some unique or specific combination of cultural, sexual and economic factors is now giving prominence to anxiety as the disorder of the day, largely afflicting young adults who “burn out” regularly and are never satisfied with nor capable of enjoying their lives. While current cultural contexts and socio-economic conditions are usually cited as “causes” for the increase in suffering—the divisiveness in our politics, despair over the failure to address and/or solve the perils of global climate change, the threat of an artificially intelligent future where humans will lose their central role—an adequately technical analysis of its root source remains to be properly framed for psychoanalytic theory and, I will add, for public consumption.

Freud on Anxiety: Still Useful?

In his 1925/6 essay, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety” (*SE XX*),⁸ Freud made his most complex attempt to comprehend how and why the condition of anxiety arises. His thoughts have been largely deemed unsatisfactory not only by himself (see his “Modifications”) but by later researchers.⁹ Still, the distinctions Freud made remain

⁷ Which he links to the Christian idea of ultimate salvation that we hope will redeem our inherent original sin.

⁸ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XX, 87-157, with supplementary addenda, “Modifications of Earlier Views,” pp. 157-169, London: The Hogarth Press, 1959. As an indicator of Freud’s complicated struggle with anxiety note that some of his most crucial conclusions appear in Addenda.

⁹ Jacques Lacan famously called the concept of anxiety “*une affaire foireuse*” – i.e., it is “half-baked.” Yet reflecting on anxiety as explicated by Freud offered Lacan a pathway to formulating one of his truly original contributions, that of the *objet a*, half-real, half-imagined, around which fantasies of satisfaction and the memory of separation revolve.

useful. For example, he decided that *anxiety* is to be distinguished from *inhibition*, where a drive impulse originating in the *id* is countermanded by the *ego* (“the ego exerts power over the processes of the *id*” (93). *Inhibitions* are, that is, reactions against the drive impulses that insistently begin in the unconscious: the subject is rendered incapable of performing basic functions, like walking, associated with their unconscious wishes because the ego has given those functions a “signal of unpleasure.” (93)¹⁰

Freud notes that while the ego is “part of the *id*” it nonetheless works actively to repress or prevent the satisfaction of our unconscious wishes that are generated in and by the *id*, either by completely inhibiting them or by permitting them the partial “satisfaction” of being sequestered in “symptoms” outside the ego’s boundaries. *Symptoms* differ from *inhibitions* in their origination and their function. They lift an inhibition—provisionally: they permit drive satisfaction to be expressed, but only in fantasy form. As mental processes symptoms have escaped the ego’s organization, and have (unlike with inhibitions) maintained the pleasure of satisfaction (or *jouissance*) in a quasi-existence outside the ego’s organization: they hold *jouissance* in abeyance, so to speak. This leads the ego to struggle less against the original drive impulse, already repressed via inhibitions, than against the *symptom*, which “continually exerts its demand for satisfaction” (97-98). In the end, though, such a struggle leads to an impasse wherein the ego acts more passively than in the case of inhibitions, allowing symptoms to exist without aggressively resisting them.

As with the symptom, *anxiety* is untroubled by wrestling with *id* impulses (161); it is deaf to the continuous clamor for satisfaction (or *jouissance*) that surges from the *id* yet does not attempt, like the symptom, to suggest it harbors a treasure of accumulated enjoyment. Indeed, Freud argues that *anxiety* is exclusively related to the *ego*: given that the energy the ego deploys in anxiety is “desexualized” (161), the ego is already largely immunized against unsatisfiable *id* impulses.

Freud ultimately distinguishes *realistic anxiety* (arising upon the ego’s signals of actual imminent danger) from *purely mental anxiety* (164 ff.)—a neurotic anxiety that

¹⁰ I am focusing on his piece, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety.” One develops a limp, for example, because one has associated the “Earth” with the “Mother,” who is off limits to sexual relations. The limp means the erotic wish that has been repressed is expressed by an inability to touch her stand-in, the Earth.

also arises when the ego signals danger: but the danger *of what*? The *purely mental aspects* of anxiety disorders are then defined by Freud as *phobias*, the two main ones being *animal phobias* and *agoraphobias*. The first (animal phobias) relates to the fantasy of castration, and the second to the fear of sexual temptation in the world abroad.

Freud puzzles this out, using the case of “Little Hans” whose animal phobia—his kind of anxiety—concerned horses: if Hans ever left his house to go into the streets he was convinced a horse would bite him. Freud analyzes the phobia of “Little Hans” as originating in “castration anxiety”¹¹ (dread of losing the bodily organ of pleasure, a menace attributed to the father). In psychoanalytic theory (Freud/Lacan) the fantasy of castration is the crucial, central threat that the ego experiences—“castration anxiety”—before it can exit the Oedipus complex. After Oedipus, the child is required to yield on its desire for the Mother, the caregiver. Both castration anxiety and giving up the Mother relate to the apprehension of loss: loss of his organ, loss of his Mother—of “missing its mother yet longing for her because she satisfied all his needs.” (137) Thus Freud finds that *purely mental anxiety* is characterized primarily by the expectation of *losing an object* (and/or that object’s love for you):

[A]nxiety is a reaction to a loss, to separation: the ego has been prepared to expect castration by having undergone repeated object losses; [...] anxiety states are a reproduction of separation. (130; 133)

Hans’ phobia surfaces once he mentally distorts the figure of his father into that of a horse. The father/horse is linked to castration anxiety in Hans’ elaborate terror of being “bitten by a horse.” But, after Hans witnesses a horse falling in the street, his anxious condition adds another component: the *hope* that the horse— i.e., his father in disguise—might “fall down in the street.” This would be revenge, then for the father’s threat of castration: Oedipal Hans would have loved to slay his rival for his mother’s love; but post-Oedipal Hans now also wants his father’s love, and he knows that his “castration” has been the price of that love. The ambivalence evident in the structuring of his phobia is clear: he

¹¹ The central anxiety the ego undergoes as it develops and exits the Oedipus complex—in tandem with the dread of losing the Mother, the caregiver. Rank proposed “birth trauma” as the original paradigm of separation anxiety, and Freud at first agreed, then changed his opinion. Freud’s main concern in designating *dread of losing the object* is how to distinguish anxiety about this loss from mourning.

would like to see his father fall from his exalted place in Hans' mental universe and at the same time he wants to keep his father right there.

Anxiety has unmistakable relation to expectations; it is anxiety about something; but there is a quality of indefiniteness to the object: it is fear and not anxiety if it has found an object. (165)

In my view, the basis for the “indefiniteness” of the object is the unexpected resurgence of Oedipal rivalry with the father *after* the boy's “castration”—and exit from Oedipus—is already established: a post-Oedipal return of Oedipus in vague or obscured form. I realize that few readers of Freud have seen his portrayal of anxiety as almost pure ambivalence, being at once both a deep-seated experience of loss (e.g., castration/the Mother) combined with a (re) animated desire for revenge (a “return of Oedipus”) upon the Father who has caused the loss. (The “loss” here is of the Mother, her nourishment, that the Father's threat of castration has deprived the child of in exchange for the Father's love.) And yet that is clearly where Freud headed his analysis.

The question arises: does the structure of anxiety that Freud brings out have any connection to the contemporary rise in sufferers, diagnoses, and pharmaceutical treatment of anxiety today? There is a paragraph in the “Modifications” added to Freud's essay that strikes me as both odd (not fully prepared for by his argument up to that point) and yet of seminal importance in searching for an answer to the question of widespread anxiety today. In this paragraph, Freud focuses (almost out of the blue), on “spoiling children”:

The undesirable result of spoiling a small child is to magnify the importance of danger of losing the object (the object being protection against every situation of helplessness in comparison with every other danger). It therefore encourages the individual to remain in a state of childhood—the period of life which is characterized by motor and psychological helplessness. (167)

This somewhat unexpected conclusion to Freud's lengthy, detailed analysis now seems entirely prescient. It seems that those in “quarter life” crisis can indeed successfully negotiate a part of their lives as mature, post-Oedipal persons, while, in another part, they also reproduce the situation of pure helplessness that Freud describes as “the state of

childhood.”¹² Torn between clinging to an Oedipal condition of longing for the Mother, especially her comforts and protections, for her maternal breast (Lacan would say it is yearning for the breast as *objet a*), and pursuing the post-Oedipal Superegoic imperatives to achieve worldly success and “live the best life you can,” the quarter-lifers’ live in a state of suspension. This is perhaps why they are unable (or unwilling?) to do the kinds of chores their Mothers did for them, and still demand at another level that their Father pave their way to accessing the worldly success that should have awaited them once they left “home” and accepted their “castration.”

Consider the following list of one 25 year-old’s dreams of what she wanted to achieve by that age:

[O]wn a house in Notting Hill; be a successful TV presenter; be engaged; own a pink Audi TT. “Fuck,” I thought, not for the first time that day. I am 25 and a half; single, unable to pay my rent and the closest thing I own to a car is a broken skateboard.”¹³

The problem is, of course, that neither Mothers nor Fathers are prepared for the world either. They have told themselves that sending a child out into society is easy if only they can tick off a certain number of boxes on a pre-conceived list of “must dos” for the child as it grows, the crucial one being that they must aim their child at a university education that will “guarantee” a good job at a good salary. Parents, that is, are themselves caught in a fantasy of *keeping their children permanently under their protection, a la the Mother, tied to their children indefinitely*.¹⁴ The recent college admissions scandal in the United States, in which wealthy parents paid other people to take their children’s college entrance tests for them, and bribed college coaches to admit their child under the quota allotted to the coach for recruiting outstanding athletes, even though the child played no sports,

¹² Nearly twenty years ago I described this prolongation of childhood as a feature of modern “hysteria”—the inability to leave one’s mother’s house or one’s childhood bedroom. See my book *The Hysteric’s Guide to the Future Female Subject* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000). See also: the new, though widespread phenomenon among young Japanese men who have withdrawn from society and refuse to leave their bedrooms; called *hikikomori*, their families treat them by renting them a sister. “Rent-a-sister: Coaxing Japan’s young men out of their rooms” *BBC News*, January 18, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-46885707/rent-a-sister-coaxing-japan-s-hikikomori-out-of-their-rooms>.

¹³ Juliana Piskorz, *op cit*.

¹⁴ Does anyone now recall an older generation’s fears of ruining a child’s chances in life by tying a child to the Mother’s “apron strings” or creating a “Momma’s boy”?

amply demonstrates this. See also the numerous reports that “helicopter parents” telephone their children who are away at college daily to wake them up and remind them of the assignments they must complete that day. Some have been known to accompany their adult child to his or her job interviews. Indeed, it could be argued that their children’s compliance with and acquiescence to being retained psychologically inside the family’s circle is a manifestation of what Freud saw as the other face of anxiety: agoraphobia, fear of going out into the world. Indeed, where Freud sees this a fear of sexual temptations “out there” it is the case that these anxiety-ridden quarter lifers have failed to launch their own families, their own sexual partnerships that might disrupt their original family ties—in sum, they have foreclosed enjoyment for themselves.

The parents seem convinced that the status of children permanently attached to and dependent on them is precisely what will permit those children to succeed in life—the very opposite of what Oedipus and its waning was supposed to do. Witness the new phenomenon of what one critic calls “snowplow” parenting in which parents assiduously clear every possible obstacle out of their children’s pathway to success, meaning a pre-defined established route to an Ivy League degree—and? Nothing else. There is no concern for addressing questions of the child’s character, of their developing their interests in various domains, of learning how to love life, of developing courage to face their lives, or imagining alternatives to the pre-existing checklist for “success,” even developing a hobby. The “Age of Anxiety” indeed.

Widespread anxiety disorders may be the latest mutation of the fear-driven flight to the suburbs (at least from the 1950s on in the USA) where the objective of securing life at a safe remove from the dangers of urban life, including the nuclear threat,¹⁵ became a

¹⁵ On the relationship of the nuclear situation to US official governmental moves to encourage flight to the suburbs see Dean MacCannell, ‘Baltimore in the Morning . . . After’: On the Forms of Post-Nuclear Leadership,” *Diacritics* special issue on “Nuclear Criticism,” 1984 (Summer) 33-46. And for the psychological underpinnings and impact of hostility to urban life, see Juliet Flower MacCannell, “The City, Year Zero: Memory and the Spatial Unconscious,” *Journal of Romance Studies*, Vol. 7:2 2007 (Summer); 1-18. (And Donald Trump’s dream of creating a fence along our whole southern border of course plays on all such fears on insecurity and “invasion” by outsiders.)

In a recent lecture (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, May 2019), Juliet Flower MacCannell studied the recent spate of “new cities” now being built in the Middle East and in Asia, adjacent to existing cities, but intended only for visitation, not for dwelling. She argues that cities were once the very symbol of human civilization—i.e., places and spaces where large numbers of people learned (not without difficulty and conflict) to live with each other and to deal with newcomers. They were places where peoples met and mingled. But the fundamental premise on which the city is founded is now being challenged by a new urban orthodoxy that claims cities have outlived their original function of

major concern. Idealizing suburban living in the United States seemed slowly to evolve into the dream of living in “gated communities” accessible only to residents and their chosen guests.¹⁶ The spread—the metastasis, really—of this new ideal for living in safely sealed off communities seems to have touched many aspects of life. And especially the lives of the children whose parents chose to move into these “secure” communities.

Their parents assured the first generations of such children that living inside the gates was the *only* way to ensure their safety and security.¹⁷ No one seemed to bother wondering how this ideal of living inside what was effectively a container that supposedly excluded evil actually affected the minds, the psyches of the children. One symptomatic

symbolizing the possibility of an impossible human co-existence. Indeed, in most planning for “gentrification” and the “new cities” now blossoming in Asia and the Gulf States, we find the emphasis is on visual fantasies (or their opposite, the revival and recycling of clichéd older forms as in, e.g., the “new urbanism,”) rather than on their capacity to address their inhabitants’ multiform needs and desires. Indeed, the erstwhile Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg recently remarked that he is pleased that his city has become a ‘playground for billionaires.’

Urbanists today openly argue that cities are no longer concerned with symbolizing our ability to live together, but the opposite: they persist and remain viable chiefly as nodes of international finance capital, and are to be open only to periodic visitation by suburbanites—tourists— not seen as places for dwelling. Saskia Sassen, one of the world’s foremost urban theorists has written:

Now that most people in the highly developed countries reside in suburbs and small towns, the large city has assumed the status of exotica. Modern tourism is no longer centered on the historic monument, concert hall, or museum, but on [...] some version of the urban scene fit for tourism. (Saskia Sassen and Frank Roost, “The City—Strategic Site for the Global Entertainment Industry,” in S. Fainstein and D. Judd, eds. *The Tourist City*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, p 143.)

¹⁶ One family I am familiar with bought a home in such a gated community, situated on a nature preserve near the Pacific Ocean. There were no walls around the residences (nor could there be given the status of the protected nature preserve). Nevertheless, to visit any of the residences, one had to open large metal gates with the correct entry code in order to drive on to the single road along which the community’s houses were built.

¹⁷ Setha Low has written:

Walled communities go way back in the history of human habitation. Ancient towns were surrounded by walls to protect inhabitants and their property. In the United States, gated residential developments first originated in upscale communities such as Llewellyn Park, N.J., in the 1850s, and in resorts like New York’s Tuxedo Park, developed in 1886 as a hunting retreat and ringed by 24 miles of barbed wire. It wasn’t until the 1960s and 1970s, however, that middle-class Americans first sealed themselves inside in planned retirement communities like Leisure World in Seal Beach. In the 1980s, real estate speculation was the driving force behind building gated communities around golf courses designed for exclusivity and prestige. By 2000, Southern California gated communities expanded to the suburbs and included a broad range of residents, not just the rich -- although along with supposed cachet, those walls and gates also added to the price tag.

“Imprisoned by the Walls Built to Keep ‘the Others’ Out” by Setha M. Low, a professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and author of “Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America” (Routledge 2003).

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-dec-19-oe-low19-story.html>

response, however, seems evident in the following incident, from 1994. Bear in mind that the children and teenagers who lived in the gated community of Coto de Caza, in Orange County California, a “luxury community” built by Chevron, had had the experience of living elsewhere before their parents moved them to the new development.

On Halloween night in 1994, two different men were viciously assaulted by a group of masked teenagers and savagely beaten. At first residents wanted to know, angrily, how hoodlum teenagers, obviously from the ghettos of Hispanics they had spent massive sums to keep at a safe distance, were able to breach the community’s security. Soon, however, it turned out that the miscreants were the children of the people who lived in and owned houses in Coto de Caza: the children had evidently rebelled against the prison-like situation.

Speaking for Orange County Sheriff’s Department, Lt. Bob NeSmith told the residents Wednesday that six investigators and a sergeant had been assigned to the case full time... “These are kids who live here,” he said. “A hundred kids just didn’t jump over the fence.” Some residents said Wednesday that teen-age belligerence is a longstanding problem in the community [...]. Said another, who also did not want to be identified: “My reaction was one of horror, but not surprise [...]. The kids who live here have done damage to this golf course many, many times.” Resident Marsha Lassen, 48, said she believed that many of the youths who participated in the attack lived in the community, where houses sell for up to \$10 million, or opened the gates to those who didn’t. “My reaction is one of grave disappointment,” Lassen said. “But you know, I thought it was bound to happen sooner or later. Here we are, living in this community that we moved to because we longed to be safe, and now, we aren’t. You know what can be done about this? Nothing. Because none of these parents will do anything about it.”¹⁸

Fast forward to the “quarter lifers” of today. There seems to be virtually no rebellion like that of the angry teenagers of Coto de Caza who chafed at being held in the virtual prison

¹⁸ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-11-03-me-58264-story.html> (accessed July 9, 2019)

of their gated community. They obviously revolted against their parents' efforts to keep them "safe" and contained within the parental version of "secure" life.

So, why is there no rebellion, no secondary "Oedipus" as in the case of Little Hans—or fantasies of parricide among the anxious young people today? It is difficult to say, given that we have no access to what fantasies they might entertain vis-à-vis their parents. The fact that their parents are rarely even mentioned in their complaints may nonetheless indicate that their fathers and mothers are at the core of the problem of their anxiety. After all, living a deeply unhappy, visibly unfulfilled life that sees nothing but obstacles in their path may just be the unconscious response to their parents' having virtually locked them into "secure" bubbles where no obstacles or danger were supposed to interfere with their "success" as adults.

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