Opinion
Spirituality



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Perhaps all children are slightly obsessed with death once they learn that it also waits for them. The combination of incomprehensibility and inevitability is potent. I, however, obsessed not only about death per se, but about the myriad ways it might come. Specifically, I obsessed about all the ways a civilization-ending catastrophe might uproot my home, destroy my family and doom us all to a terrified end.

It was the terrified end that really got me. I spent my playground time clambering up swing sets and doing the balance beam across the narrowest and highest ridges I could find, gleefully flirting with the prospect of breaking my own neck, the way you do when your body still feels like a rubber ball. But the thought of knowing I or the people I loved were going to die — from plague, from a bomb — and being absolutely powerless to stop it: unbearable.

So I pored over National Geographic for the latest news on environmental degradation. Years before it made the news as a public health threat, I knew all about the growing dangers of MRSA and antibiotic resistance. I followed every story about bird flu and Ebola, and I reflected with grim amazement at the ease with which heads of state could destroy the world at the touch of a few buttons. If it could happen, surely it was going to happen.

It is not lost on me now that I doomed myself to that which I most feared: a long, dark night of terror over an inevitable end. But an even greater irony is that all my exaggerated childhood fears, probably psychological stand-ins for much more mundane fears about loss and family, are coming true.

Antibiotic resistance is rapidly approaching crisis levels, and medical professionals warn of an effective return to the pre-penicillin age. An incompetent bully with impulse control problems has the final say over America's nuclear arsenal. And "environmental degradation" is no longer the most pressing concern — whether we will keep our beautiful reefs, whether air quality conduces to health. Now the question discussed at summits is whether we can keep global warming below civilization-ending levels.

Funnily enough, watching my private anxieties become national headlines has bothered me less than younger me could have predicted. Part of it is simply "been there, done that." Growing up means surviving fear. Part of it is the increase in self-knowledge and psychological acuity that (hopefully) arrives with age. I know now

that the sense of instability, of the world being about to collapse in on itself, its solid boundaries melting into unreality — that doesn't just come from physical threats.

Among other sources, it comes from facing profound institutional depravity. It comes from knowing that for years and years the bishops have operated more or less as a mafia, offering a public face of pastoral concern while negotiating self-protective deals and enforcing codes of silence behind closed doors. It comes from knowing how utterly socially disposable so many people are, and how thin are the barriers to disposability.

Most recently, it comes from reminders of the corruption that exists in elite Catholic schools, a perverse mirror of the hierarchy's corruption. Whatever the outcome of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings for his nomination to the Supreme Court, they have demonstrated that slogans like "men for others" are perfectly compatible with social scenes built on binge drinking, cruel jokes at women's expense and rumored outrages that never gain any real traction.

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Of course, identifying the most pertinent sites of corruption and collapse doesn't in itself detract from the terror, any more than discovering you have cancer rather than plague. Instead, I have found that the first step to peace is to stop demanding a cure. In *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* Jean Pierre de Caussade writes:

> Can the divine will ever be inopportune? Can it be mistaken? "But there is this business of mine! I require such a thing! The necessary helps have been taken from me. That man thwarts all my good works, is it not most unreasonable? This illness comes on just when my health is most necessary to me." To all this there is but one answer — that the will of God is the only thing necessary, therefore what it does not grant must be useless. My good souls! nothing is wanting to you. If you only knew what these events really are that you call misfortunes, accidents, and disappointments, and in which you can see nothing but what is irrelevant, or unreasonable, you would lie deeply ashamed and excuse yourselves.

If this sounds like a quietist excuse for inaction, it shouldn't. God requires us to dispense justice, to care for our neighbor, to build up the world in peace and mercy.

But if the world simply seems too sickening, if we wait half in fear and half in desire for some apocalyptic act of violence that will blot it all out, it can be good to remember that the world is not ours to dispose of.

When in the depths of one my childhood anxiety attacks, my mother used to provide a calm voice of reason. She would remind me that we have no way of knowing whether any of these disasters would actually occur, that catastrophe is often averted by some unforeseen intervention. Inwardly, I would wonder whether these rational comforts were not simply a way of running from the problem. I still have great sympathy with the frustrations of those who suffer from anxiety and are told to "think positive" or "look on the bright side."

It is very possible that anxiety distorts perception of the world. It is also possible that the world is simply that bad, and the anxious are simply attuned to the facts.

The good news is that it doesn't matter. God deals out vengeance; God provides the harvest. God asks nothing from us either in the past or the future, only now.

> Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
>
> As streams in dry land.
>
> Those who are sowing in tears
>
> Will sing when they reap.
>
> They go out, they go out, full of tears,
>
> Carrying seed for the sowing:
>
> They come back, they come back, full of song,
>
> Carrying their sheaves.
>
> (Psalm 126)

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