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What seems to be random

by Joe Ferullo

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The markets are rattled. Investors are nervous. Uncertainty pervades. To find comfort and answers, there are two ways to go: the poetry of the ancients or Matthew's Gospel.

A common thread among people who don't believe in God (or are just unsure) is that fear of death spawned belief in a higher power that would deliver us an afterlife. But I don't think death is the thing here -- it seems to me that we really fear randomness. If we all knew that we would live to a fine old age and die peacefully in our sleep, death would have no sting. But, in fact, children die, and young parents, and good people who have done no harm. Even more lose limbs, suffer mental incapacity, and face countless challenges that appear frighteningly random. Coping, it seems, is a central force in life.

In *The New Yorker*, writer Stephen Greenblatt looks at death and uncertainty through the eyes of the ancient Roman poet Lucretius. His 2000-year-old essay-in-verse, called "On The Nature of Things," helped spark the shift in Renaissance thinking when it was re-discovered in an Italian monastery library in 1417.

Lucretius was an advocate of randomness; life, he said, had no meaning or plan, so worrying about it was simply ludicrous. His advice: embrace the day, because that is all we have; every moment spent focused on anxiety about a future over which we have no control is a moment we can never get back. Lucretius was no atheist; he just believed that the gods of ancient Rome and Greece were too high and mighty to much care about the daily goings-on of humans scurrying about on the crust of the Earth. But, as Greenblatt writes, that outlook was taken up by later philosophers who used it to challenge the existence of Heaven, Hell and God.

Greenblatt poignantly places his mother as a central character in his fascination with Lucretius. When he

was a boy, she was obsessed with death, convinced she would die early and leave her children unprotected. She fretted, brooded, and plotted endlessly about it -- and this had a heavy effect on her son. She actually lived, Greenblatt says, well into her 90s -- so Lucretius' view that worry was a waste of time made instant sense to a boy raised in such an atmosphere.

But Greenblatt seems to make a choice that is no choice at all: randomness versus the existence of God. In Matthew 5:45, Jesus tips his hat to this reality as well, noting that his Father lets the sun shine on both the evil and the good, lets the rain fall on the just and unjust. To us humans, it can all seem mind-boggling in its inconsistency -- but not because God is uncaring, and not because he has no plan. It's just that we don't have the capacity to understand the plan in all its dimensions.

The world seems utterly random -- but it isn't, really.

Science (often pitted as the enemy of faith) has shown us this. Time and again over the centuries, research has discovered that events in nature which at one time appeared random actually are subject to "laws." Laws of physics, gravity, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. There is a plan, science says, one that we slowly uncover as we expand our understanding of the world around us.

Randomness still exists, of course, and it is frightening to behold. In the face of it, normally bright and bold investors run like scared herds of sheep away from stocks and bonds, and toward the "safety" of astronomically-priced gold. And, of course, bad things still happen to very good people for no reason at all.

Lucretius would advise us to shrug it off and move on; but something about the human soul senses that, deep underneath it all, in dimensions we have yet to reach, there is a plan. We may never understand it -- the sun and rain will continue to nourish the worthy and unworthy alike -- but it is there.

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