

The End of the World

I have been racking my brains, which are the worse for wear after such rough handling, to think of an appropriate response to the moral maelstrom that has engulfed humanity since 9-11, an expression that functions now less as a date than a mark of the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it. If Osama bin Laden intended the attack on the World Trade Center and terrorist acts before and after it to precipitate the destruction of American customs and practices, he and his fellows have had frightening success. Not that he can be given all the credit. He probably doesn't even know what a full and fair election is, let alone how the complexities of the process in the United States can be exploited so that the winner loses and the loser wins. He's not shipping SUVs into the country or jobs out. I don't know what method of bookkeeping he uses for his vast wealth, but I suspect it's more accurate than US corporate practice. Anything would be.

Sometimes when I tell people that I converted to Catholicism, I add, "So you see, I wasn't born this way; I did this to myself." Analogously, we landed ourselves in most of the messes in which we now flounder long before most of us had even heard of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Even so, the murk that arose as the towers collapsed has never entirely cleared and never will. We live differently now, not so much because of the catastrophe—which was horrific beyond all words—but because of the way that event has been exploited to advance the interests and desires of a shockingly small group of people at the expense of the health, in every sense of the word, of humanity. In short, we lost the "war on terrorism" as soon as that phrase was coined, throwing us into a belligerent stance and thus necessitating vast military expenditures at the sacrifice of people's basic human needs for adequate nourishment and shelter, potable water, and air free of deadly contaminants—and I'm not referring to the Iraqi people (or to any other hypothetical "them") here but to U.S. citizens ("us").

Before 9-11, statements like these, which I hope have been construed as critical of our government (indistinguishable now from the megacorporations after which it is increasingly modeled) would have been deemed merely the rantings of left-wing leftover, and so dismissed. Since then, however, some might label them outright treason, and so punishable by incarceration or even death. Now, I don't seriously believe that I'm likely to be carted off for telling you that I believe that this country is being ruled by a cadre of belligerent and (with notable exceptions) brilliant barons bent on controlling the world's resources for their own aggrandizement. I am simply illustrating the fact that what once seemed unthinkable—the stifling of free speech—is now being threatened, as are a good many other liberties. For those of us who grew up believing, as did the framers of the Constitution, that no ruler's mandate trumped a basic set of human rights, this shift really does represent the end of one world and the beginning of another: darker, more dangerous, perhaps even deadly.

When it comes to the fight-or-flight model of response to menace, you'll definitely catch me strapping on my running shoes. Appalled by the corruption and greed I perceive to be the motive forces now driving American society, I just want out of here. Deeply though I love my country (as distinct from my nation), I want to light out for a place where the welfare of all children everywhere informs both private and public decisions, where taxation is truly progressive and the moneys collected are spent on programs like universal health care and research into alternative energy sources but not a penny on weapons, where the citizens treat each other and the sojourners among them with civility and tolerance. And if there were such a place, I'd probably have my airline ticket in hand. Actually, I wouldn't still be here, rattling on at you. I'd be off in utopia.

So making a dash for it isn't a feasible response even if it were an appropriate one. And I don't believe that it is. Nor is its opposite in the classic stress model—standing my ground, baring my teeth, pouncing on my enemy and tearing him to pieces (unless he shreds me first). In so doing, I would be acting in the very way that my enemy has acted toward me. How am I going to affirm the life that the terrorists seek to obliterate and counter the death-dealing methods adopted by people in power in response if I adopt the same destructive tactics? I'd be no more effective than the foolish tigers in the children's story who chased each other around the base of a tree until, in the hot sun, they melted into ghee.

The fight-or-flight model was based on studies of male subjects, as the preponderance of research has been until recently. A new study at UCLA, focusing on female responses to distress, uncovered quite a different and much more social pattern, which the investigators termed “tend and befriend.” Oxytocin, generated by both males and females under duress, is enhanced by estrogen but inhibited by male hormones. Perhaps as a result of these differing hormonal responses to oxytocin, women tend to cope by nurturing their children or seeking out others, friends or even strangers, for support. Withdrawal and aggression, it would appear, are not universal responses, as we’ve been led to believe. Such a study demonstrates that other models, even at the biological level, can exist. The moral implications of this diversity cry out to be envisioned and explored.

I would call the model I’m about to sketch a Christian response if I hadn’t grown uneasy with the label “Christian.” I suspected from the outset that I wasn’t a “real” Catholic, not in the Roman sense, and I have become more than content to call myself an alternative Catholic or a Zen Catholic. But I still thought of myself as a Christian. Gradually, however, I began to see that “the Christ” referred not so much to an entity as to an accretion of ideas, formed across centuries, largely by men, many of whom appeared to suffer from considerable sexual anxiety, and imposed systematically, often by intimidation, upon various populations (among them my own gender), not all of whom benefitted from their espousal. This setup sounded more descriptive of the Romans than the Christians to me.

Truth to tell, I recognize now, the meanings commonly ascribed to Christianity entail an assortment of beliefs I simply can not embrace. This reality was brought home to me sharply not long ago when I sought to volunteer as a nursing-home visitor under the sponsorship of Love Thy Neighborhood Ministries in Tucson. In interviewing me, the director inquired whether I had accepted Jesus Christ as my personal saviour and was plainly troubled when I replied that I had not, because doing so would require me to believe in damnation, a fate God loves us far too much to impose. He read me several passages from Scripture, and admonished me how urgent it was that we bring the people we work with to Jesus Christ, even on their deathbeds, for the sake of their immortal souls, but he didn’t make this belief a condition for taking me on. So now I visit a woman who also has MS. Born a Mormon, she’s now a Buddhist, insofar as she embraces any tradition, and I’m far more concerned that her bottom be kept free of bedsores than her soul unblemished by sin.

If kerygma is one of the practices that defines a Christian, then I am not entitled to call myself one. How, then, to identify myself? Perhaps the term “pre-Christian” is as descriptive as any other, harking back to the earliest days after Jesus’s execution, when his followers gathered over simple meals, bread and wine and perhaps a little fish, and recollected his words as best they could. Over time, others joined them, who had to be told his story, who had to be taught his precepts, and one can easily understand how tellers might blur some details, elaborate others, add some to suit the needs of a particular audience for comfort, discipline, excitement, mystery. Gradually, to suit the inclinations of his followers, Jesus became less a rabbinical figure than a messianic one. But I remain devoted to the Teacher.

Even he is a hypothetical creation, not just because his historical existence can only be posited, not proved, but because his original being has, in the course of centuries, been so thickly overlaid with invention that it can no longer be discerned, any more than one can see the precipitating grain of sand when gazing at a pearl. In this sense, any way one speaks of him, whether as Christos or simply as Jesus, can only ever be an imaginative construct. As my husband has often said, when you talk about Jesus, you reveal little—maybe nothing—about Jesus but a great deal about yourself. I don’t claim that anything I say to you about him is Truer than anything a great many others have said, although I speak from a more radical locus than most. I adopt this word not in the political and largely pejorative sense to which it has been reduced but in the sense of its origin in the Latin word *radix*, root.

That is, I am trying to come at the fundamental ideas that set Christianity in motion and to conceive a world based on their implementation. Because I’m not a biblical scholar, I look to *The Five Gospels* of the Jesus Seminar and the reconstructed Q sayings to reveal what an itinerant Jewish teacher on fire with a vision

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of a transformed reality might have said to his followers—both then and today. (Now there's a leap of faith for you: relying on a text that doesn't even exist!) These texts suggest "that the original Christians appeared to be centered totally on concerns about their relationships with God and with other people, and their preparation for the Kingdom of God on earth. Totally absent from their spiritual life are almost all of the factors that we associate with Christianity today. There is absolutely no mention of (in alphabetic order): adultery, angels, apostles, baptism, church, clergy, confirmation, crucifixion, demons, disciples, divorce, Eucharist, great commission to convert the world, healing, heaven, hell, incarnation, infancy stories, John the Baptist, Last Supper, life after death, Mary and Joseph and the rest of Jesus's family, magi, miracles, Jewish laws concerning behavior, marriage, Messiah, restrictions on sexual behavior, resurrection, roles of men and women, Sabbath, salvation, Satan, second coming, signs of the end of the age, sin, speaking in tongues, temple, tomb, transfiguration, trial of Jesus, trinity, or the virgin birth" (B.A. Anderson, www.religioustolerance.org). Although a number of these elements are dear to me, and a few figure deeply in my spiritual life, none contribute to my inquiry here.

This will take the form of a thought experiment based on the premise of the Good News: The Kingdom of God exists right here, right now, among us. What? we are likely to squawk, looking at the mess around us. Where? I am reminded of my daughter's reaction when, right after her college graduation, I took her to New York City. After a night in the old Algonquin Hotel, we walked over to the old Times Square. She stared in one direction and another. "You mean," she said at last in a small voice, "this is it?" I realized that she had never seen it except on television, thronged with revelers waiting for the ball to drop on New Year's Eve. Similarly, we have fantastic images of God's Kingdom, shaped by centuries of literary imagination and convention: the land without sorrow or sighing, flowing with milk and honey, where even the beasts cuddle up together and nobody has to do anything more taxing than cast down his golden crown at the edge of the glassy sea, a place ever-promised, not yet entered, but soon . . . but soon. . . .

Jesus is not making a promise here. He's stating a reality: the Kingdom of God is in our midst, whether we can perceive it or not. We may dwell in it; we may not; or (and I think this is the most likely scenario) we may drift in and out of it depending on our current level of consciousness. Jesus's teachings provide a way (although I'm not sure he would claim it the only way) to achieve and sustain it. What I'm wondering is how the world might be altered if we responded to its vagaries according to his basic precepts: tranquility, forgiveness, generosity, love. These are "warm fuzzy" words, easily acknowledged and then dismissed in the face of the myriad practical concerns that dominate our lives. But Jesus means them not as ideals (wouldn't it be great if we all loved each other) but as practices (you must love everyone you encounter, and believe me, some of them are going to be pretty smelly or scary). Okay, we say, taking a deep breath. We understand. Tell us what to do.

Be calm and trust in God's goodness.

Peace does not begin with the establishment and maintenance of an impressive military force, or the manufacture of high-tech weapons that threaten an opponent's annihilation. It does not begin with the deployment of personnel and their use of these weapons against people whom most of them will never see. It does not even begin with the signing of a treaty. It begins in the heart that rejects fear and affirms its own value in the vast Unfoldment of which it is a minute yet significant part. "What do sparrows cost?" Jesus asks. "A dime a dozen? Yet not one of them is overlooked by God. . . . Don't be so timid: You're worth more than a flock of sparrows" (Luke 12:6-7). Most of us are easily spooked, and overcoming timidity doesn't come naturally. It requires preparation and practice. Apparently the brains of Tibetan Buddhist monks don't register startlement even when a pistol is fired (Daniel Goleman on TechNation, 2 Nov. 2003). The average person isn't likely to spend years in deep meditation. Nevertheless, we can choose to alter our behavior in ways that foster feelings of tranquility and trust.

For a start, we could stop using the word "terrorist," which places in the hands of others the power

to paralyze us with fear. This fear has suited the purposes of a band of angry men made dangerous by their hatred of an invention, “the West,” which they perceive to threaten their cherished beliefs. In other words, they themselves are operating out of fear, the foundations of which are so nonrational that we may be able to do very little to allay it. But terror has also suited the purposes of many in our own government, who play on it to drum up support for acts that might be resisted by a confident population. If they scare us enough with their rhetoric of intimidation, we’re likely to put ourselves under their protection and do whatever they tell us will ensure our safety, which alas seems to involve performing murderous acts that will further arouse the hatred and fear of “terrorists.”

Since names have power, why don’t we call the “terrorists” something else, something that doesn’t reduce us to quaking children but permits us to confront them as equals? “Mean-sons-of-bitches” seems descriptive but indecorous. Why not use the name they have given themselves, al-Qaeda, and refer to ourselves as the United States, even if they do call us the Great Satan. We know who we are.

Or do we?

Judge and correct yourself, not others.

Self-scrutiny has never ranked very high on any list of American virtues I’ve come across. We’re apt to dismiss it as navel-gazing or scab-picking and move on to some more practical (and preferably profitable) activity. We’re quick enough to condemn the behavior of others—say, possessing weapons of mass destruction—but fail to note anything peculiar about permitting the same to ourselves. “Why do you notice the sliver in your friend’s eye, but overlook the timber in your own?” Jesus asks. “How can you say to your friend, ‘Friend, let me get the sliver in your eye,’ when you do not notice the timber in your own? You phony, first take the timber out of your own eye, and then you’ll see well enough to remove the sliver in your friend’s eye” (Luke 6:41-42). Oh, but it’s different for us, we hasten to object. We need these weapons to ensure the safety of the whole world, because we’re strong and wise, unlike those crazy little men over there, who are determined to destroy us all in a nuclear holocaust or a ravage of smallpox or something that we would never do (never mind the incinerated Japanese or the infected Indians, those were different). Despite all our protestations, though, it wasn’t different, still isn’t different, will never be different. The crazy little men are not necessarily over there. When we read that we must stop the leader who “has pursued his ambition to dominate Iraq and the broader Middle East using the only means he knows, intimidation, coercion and annihilation of all those who might stand in his way,” we have to stop and think which of several leaders Colin Powell is describing. As long as any possess weapons of mass destruction, all put the world in mortal danger.

“The standard you apply will be the standard applied to you,” Jesus warns (Luke 6:38). Even as we mourn the 3,000 who died in the events of 9-11, we must acknowledge that on that day and every day since, an average of 24,000 people have died of starvation, brought on not only by drought, floods, and disease but also by the policies of governments and corporations (if the two can any longer be distinguished) that encourage deforestation, land erosion, the abandonment of subsistence farming for cash crops like coffee and cocaine, and so on, frequently leading to political turmoil that results in repressive regimes, many of them hospitable to the aforementioned governments and corporations. Once again the tigers chase each other around the palm tree, only this time the substance they melt into is not clarified butter but bitter poison. That the 3,000 died because of furious religious hatred and the starving because of greed for resources and power makes no difference. Dead people are still dead, no matter how they got that way. God grieves the loss of every one of them.

Respond to wrongs not with retaliation but with disproportionate generosity.

There is more than enough culpability to go around. But neither blame nor hand-wringing serve to alter the world in ways that might promote its survival. We must behave toward one another altogether differently than we might have done in earlier times when, although enemies might slaughter each other’s troops wholesale, the mayhem was confined to a specific and generally quite limited geographical area: Hastings,

Agincourt, Gallipoli, Antietam. One of the consequences of the globalization that developed during the last century and continues apace in this one is that all the world's a battlefield and all the men and women merely potential casualties. All. We really can eradicate all life (except maybe the cockroaches) at will.

Instead of retaliation, which seems to come to us naturally, we must learn reconciliation, which apparently does not (but only apparently—keep in mind “tend and befriend”). What if, rather than “getting even,” which always implies returning harm for harm, we adopted an altogether different economy, based upon Jesus's injunction to give without expecting anything in return and not just to give but give more than is called for. “When someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other as well,” Jesus instructs. “When someone takes away your coat, don't prevent that person from taking your shirt along with it” (Luke 6:29). I doubt that he literally intends us to run around bruised and naked, but from these concrete examples we get the message: Do the utterly unexpected by being not reactive to another's wrongdoing but proactive in your own largesse. Imagine how we could confound our enemies if we were to leap out of the deadly *pas de deux* (or *trois* or *quatre*) of warfare and begin some different dance—new rhythms, new gestures—leaving them with gaping mouths or empty arms.

Let's say, for example, that we take the \$121 to \$1,595 billion that war with Iraq is estimated to cost in the decade following the initial attack (“The Economic Consequences of a War with Iraq,” William D. Nordhaus, Yale University, Nov. 2002, www.econ.yale.edu) and spend it on food, medicines, infrastructure, and environmental cleanup. What could Saddam Hussein do to top that? Although I'm no economist, I'm guessing we'd have enough left over to take care of other problems, like our own crumbling infrastructure and shambles of a medical system. If we're going to spend the money anyway, why not get some measurable return on our investment: linear feet of bridges built or restored, numbers of vials of vaccine exhausted in inoculating children against measles, quantity of surplus grain taken out of stockpiles and distributed wherever malnourishment threatens infant brain development.

If forbearance and generosity were sufficient, at least some of us might succeed in behaving well. But Jesus commands—and this lies at the very heart of the gospel message—that we go even further: “Love your enemies.” He isn't talking about some warm upwelling in the heart, which comes readily enough in a reciprocal relationship. He isn't referring to an emotional state at all. He is imposing a discipline, the most strenuous one imaginable: to regard people who bear the utmost hostility toward us and treat us in the vilest ways as our fellow human beings, worthy of God's love and therefore of ours. He does not ask us to validate their feelings or approve their actions but to work at embracing such people in spite of these. It's an idea of astonishing simplicity and beauty, and I'd like to assure you that it can be carried out, but I'm not sure I've ever managed it. Love Osama bin Laden after what he ordered done to a host of innocents on a bright autumn morning? Love Kim Jong-il, who allows the North Korean people to starve while military expenditures consume nearly a third of the GDP? Love George W. Bush, who bleats about the right to life of the unborn child whilst contemplating “shock and awe” tactics against millions of born ones (half the population of Iraq is under fifteen)? Yes. Yes. Yes. I don't know how God does it, but she does—and expects no less from us. If we concentrated fully on loving our enemies, we'd have neither the energy nor the inclination left over for killing.

Oh come on, Nancy, I can guess you're thinking about now. Get real. The hell you don't believe it will freeze over before Donald Rumsfeld tries to practice loving Saddam Hussein. You're never going to reassure the majority of people sufficiently so that they don't stampede to war whenever their leaders shout that the sky is falling and the only way to keep it in place is to drop bombs out of it. Even if you could, you're never going to persuade those leaders to engage in activities that will undermine their own perpetuation. They will do anything—even subvert the electoral process—to get and keep power. And you forgot about the oil. No businessman, smart or dim, is going to pass up the opportunity to wrest control of 300 billion barrels of oil and 110 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Never mind what Jesus would say, do, or drive. Think of the profits!

I know all that. I'm not stupid. I just don't care. If we all sat around waiting for the other guy to see

the light, we'd be squatting here in the darkness for the rest of our days. My task—and yours—as I see it is to be the light. Incandescence takes a lot of energy. Who can waste any looking around to count how many other people are switching on? If I believe in values like trust, personal rectitude, generosity, forgiveness, and love, I must practice them whether or not anyone else is doing so (and millions upon millions are doing so). Virtue is proactive, not reactive, and majority doesn't rule. Nevertheless, the more the merrier.

Enough of us, and we could create an utterly new world: not the world as we know it, safe and comfortable for us but bearing, in its inequities, the seeds of its own destruction; not the one that has taken its place, in which fear and hostility have been created and then inflamed to serve the several agendas of men who lust after power or wealth or salvation or various bizarre combinations of the three; but a third world with a fresh set of characteristics (one of which would be the absence of the old world's Third World). Even in the realm of science, paradigm shifts are rare, rarer still when it comes to human behavior. But a well-developed paradigm for our third world exists already, eclipsed but not extinguished by the testosterone-driven world view of those who, for some centuries, have arrogated the power of defining large-scale human interactions to themselves. Throughout that time, half the world has been biochemically predisposed to an irenic alternative of sustenance and intimacy: a model that reflects remarkably well the teachings of Jesus before they fell into the hands of the patristic fathers. Since it is intrinsically affiliative rather than combative, I'm darned if I can see how it can be made into the "dominant" mode of human interaction. But I think that it's got to prevail if we want any human beings left to interact. We may not have a lot of time. I suggest we get to work.

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