

IS THE WORLD STILL THERE?

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I didn't realize I was doing it--not until it had become a habit. That is, not until I tried not to do it, but found I couldn't resist. First thing in the morning, padding around in my robe, often before I brush my teeth and always before I've had my tea, I turn on CNN to see if the world's still there. The phrase is my wife's. Hannah will call in from the next room, "Is the world still there?"

"Sort of," I'll say. Or: "It's trying to be." Or: "It thinks it is."

If Hannah must be up and out very early, she won't turn on the TV because I'm such a light sleeper; instead, as soon as she starts the car, she'll tune in an all-news station--to see if the world's still there.

We started doing this last September 12th.

When I realized we'd developed this unwelcome habit, I mentioned it to friends and found that many had taken to doing the same. We no longer believe that today will be a day like any other. We wake with the expectation that we've not seen the last of 9/11. We don't really start our day until we're reasonably sure that it will be our day and not a day of national crisis--a crisis that could possibly threaten our lives or the lives of people we love.

To be frank, I've felt no personal fear for my own safety--not because I'm a hero, but because as I've gotten older, I've learned not to feel personally threatened unless and until I'm personally threatened. But my anxiety isn't any the less for being, if you like, existential: I fear that the weave of reality itself is unraveling. Madness is no longer an individual or theoretical issue; madness is afoot in the world.

I think of it as madness more than evil because, as usual, the people who are doing evil (on all sides) believe that they're doing good--and that is mad. Fighting "evildoers" is hard enough; convincing people not to engage in the madness that they see as "good" is much more difficult. When people who believe they're doing "good" have such destructive effect, then good and evil lose their boundaries and their definitions, and reality unravels into chaos and insanity--an insanity for which there's no protection. No matter what your personal virtues or flaws, no matter your profundity or shallowness, no matter your intentions or lack of intentions--if you're above the 80th floor of the World Trade Center on a given Tuesday, or on your way to school on a bus in Jerusalem, or opening your vegetable stand in a Palestinian refugee camp, or attending a wedding in a village in Afghanistan--if the insanity is pointed your way that day, then who you are has no importance and what you are offers no protection. You're not likely to survive on any of the many ground zeros that the madness chooses to target. That's our situation now, and certainly it's real, but it's too disordered and unstable to deserve to be called "reality."

A violent surreality has become the background of even our most modest and intimate actions

The weeks following September 11th brought mass detentions of Middle Eastern men, the anthrax attacks, new antiterrorist laws that revised American civil liberties (alarmingly, as far as I was concerned), and constant, infuriatingly vague warnings of imminent terrorist attacks. The world held its breath in expectation of the Bush administration's military response. For me, it was a time of intense study. As the writer of a biweekly column for the *Austin Chronicle*, I felt a responsibility both to analyze and to bear witness. To do this as well as my powers allowed, I tried to master all the relevant facts and the history behind the facts. I read newspapers and books for hours a day--and became more deeply sad than ever in my life.

Sad, not depressed. Depression is a paralysis that numbs one's capacities to think, feel, and act. I was thinking, feeling, and acting just fine. But my heart was breaking . . . as though someone I dearly loved had died (though I'd lost no one in the attack) . . . as though the love of my life had walked out on me . . . a sadness with a physical quality that even now I find hard to describe. A heaviness in my chest that would not go away. A sense that at any moment I'd break into uncontrollable weeping.

During those weeks after 9/11, I often thought of a man I knew in my youth named Marty Ring. He was of my parents' generation, a combat veteran of World War II, and (as he told me) a blacklisted Hollywood writer. We worked as transcribers in an office on 42nd Street in Manhattan. One day--it was in 1965--there was an especially bleak headline that brought tears to my eyes. Marty saw my reaction and said: "Not enough tears, kid. Not enough tears for all the hurting in this world. Don't start crying, you'll never stop."

I don't know what's become of Marty, I haven't seen him in 35 years, but I seemed to hear him say those words over and over in the weeks after September 11th. I thought if I started really crying, I'd never stop. And still I went about my days studying, writing, following the news in excruciating detail--for instance, reading every small obit that the *New York Times* published about the dead of September 11th.

It was telling, what finally brought on the tears.

teach high school part-time at a small, nonprofit, private school in the San Fernando Valley. I was driving to my first class in mid-November--I was to teach the 11th grade "Dramatic Literature" for the next nine school weeks. The radio was tuned to a classic rock station. The DJ played the Crosby, Stills & Nash version of Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock." All my impacted tears burst from me. I should have pulled my car over to the side of the freeway, but I didn't have the sense to. I was overcome not only by weeping, but by memory--for I'd been one of those half-million people at the Woodstock festival. Even in the throes of my deep, convulsive sobs--and while trying to pilot my car--I knew what I was weeping for. And, though my tears eventually dried, it felt as though my weeping would never stop.

We'd lost the Twin Towers, we'd lost more than 3,000 people, and we were even losing (in the new antiterrorist laws and the proposed military tribunals) crucial aspects of the democratic process. We'd lost, not our innocence, for we've never been innocent, but our last sense of shared safety. I felt deeply about all of that, but that wasn't what I was weeping for. I was weeping for the collapse of a dream.

Does that seem trivial, sentimental, nostalgic? I understand why it might.

My answer: There's nothing trivial about a dream that animates a person or a generation, not when it's history's most generous, recurring dream--the dream that inspired, in their different ways, Isaiah and Buddha, Jesus, the Founding Fathers, Lincoln and Whitman, Marx, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The dream that the lion may lie down with the lamb; that mercy, justice, and freedom might be achieved in such a way as to be inseparable; that the life of one's enemy is as valuable as one's own; that we're strongest not when we have the best weapons and the most money, but when we act out of our most selfless generosity and love--a dream resurrected over and over again, only to die over and over again. On September 11th--and in all the ricocheting disasters that have followed, including the senseless murders of the Arab-Israeli struggle and the threat of nuclear war between Pakistan and India--that dream collapsed yet again. Today, there's no major public figure in America, and certainly no one in politics, to speak for that dream. None would dare, for fear of being hooted off the public stage.

The American poet Delmore Schwartz wrote the most indelible sentence of the 20th century when he titled a short story: "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." Which is why the life of that dream is so important. In that dream begin our greatest responsibilities--toward ourselves, toward each other, toward our species as it exists, not only in history (which is merely our story), but in the universe (which is the story of everything). When that dream wanes, the sense of higher responsibility that it inspires also wanes--and with it, what we're pleased nowadays to call "the quality of life" withers. In the film *Thelma and Louise*, Louise says to Thelma, "You are what you settle for." Who are we, what are we, if we settle for a life, a world, without that dream?

At the same time, while teaching my Dramatic Literature class, an often overlooked historical fact suddenly registered with me: in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the era of Christopher Marlow, William Shakespeare, and Lope de Vega, the theater was the first Western institution not under the direct control of the church or the state. It was the first Western platform which spoke freely--and, not coincidentally, this was the first era in which European women performed on the stage, the first partway-acceptable arena in which a woman could go beyond being either a wife or a nun. Which is to say: modern theater began in the dream of freedom and equality.

The kids weren't thinking only about 9/11. They were at least as concerned with the films *Moulin Rouge* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* --gaudy, flamboyant films in which romance and gender transcend all boundaries, films that grandly announce themselves as being concerned only with freedom and love.

Freedom and love were what the kids in my classes were concerned with, and mostly their own freedom and love. History was, for them, a foreign element--something for grown-ups to worry about. I'd tell them, "History isn't a spectator sport. Everything you do becomes history." Some listened and some didn't, but for both groups nothing was more important than the next date (or lack of same), the next night out, the next song by their favorite band, the next revelation about who they were and who they might be.

Does that seem trivial? It's not. They were occupied, as are the best and brightest of every generation, with recreating the great dream of humanity from scratch. Let the adults fuck up the world. Let all the laws and definitions shift, change, contradict themselves. Let buildings fall and people burn. They felt all that, they talked and thought and wrote about it, but they felt something else as well: a propellant, a vitality bursting from their very bodies, shooting them out into the world with the abandon of a young rock-singer throwing him- or herself off the stage into a mosh-pit--which is, in a way, the very thing that history was demanding of them. They leapt out into the world with or without asking, "Is the world still there?" and not knowing if it would be, but leaping anyway.

And I realized anew that the happiness of being a teacher is that you must respect and fight for the historical moment of your students, because that's the only historical moment they have. Their world is full of possibility, so why isn't yours? Their dream contains everything that's been and is and will be, so what about yours? They intend to crash into the world head-on, so what are you afraid of? "What are you afraid of?" That's one of the unexpressed but always present questions that the young ask their elders. The best of them refuse to be limited by our fears, even when our fears are quite sensible.

I watched both towers collapse, and for a while I was in danger of defining reality only in terms of the collapse of those towers. But from November through March, I stood every day with young people who--not in their thought but through their very existence--insisted that life isn't defined by what collapses. Life, now and always, is defined by what might happen next--and, in their view, anything might happen.

That, too, is always true.

They acted as though they might have a chance. And, for all we know, they might.

I realized, after a few weeks of teaching, that my terrible sadness had lifted. I still poured over the newspapers; still tried in my small way, as a writer and a high school teacher, to stand for the dream; when children the age of my students started to blow themselves and others up in the Middle East, my heart broke again and kept on breaking . . . but to give in to resignation, much less to despair, was to give up on my students, on the enormous sense of possibility that they radiated, and I couldn't do that. They were teaching me more than I ever taught them. I may have given the seniors Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* to study in Russian Literature, but they were giving back their everyday enactment of Pasternak's words: "Life is the principle of self-renewal, it is constantly

renewing and remaking and changing and transfiguring itself, it is infinitely beyond your or my obtuse theories about it."

I realized that everything I see as a decline they see as simply "the world." It makes them angry, and a few are driven to a premature despair that's terrible to witness. But for most, what I see as loss doesn't sap their vitality or their eagerness to participate, in whatever way they can find, in this historical moment. The question that keeps me more or less sane is: Who am I to define their world, their lives, by my sense of loss? What could be more unjust?

In our Creative Writing class, an 18-year-old senior, Sophia Loosli, wrote: "I think we are without an opposite. What is the opposite of the human race?" I was stunned. I'm a fairly well-read person, but that is a thought I've never seen expressed anywhere else. You might argue that the inanimate is the opposite of the animate, that unconscious insects are the opposite of human consciousness; but humanity is more than its animation and consciousness. Perhaps it is because humanity has no opposite that no one has ever sufficiently defined what humanity is. And precisely because no one has, and no one can, make such a final definition of who and what we are--precisely because of that, the horror that manifested on 9/11, and has continued to manifest in its aftermath, cannot define us and cannot be a touchstone for predicting our future.

Hope, for me, is an empty word. In Stephen Mitchell's translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, we read, "Hope is as hollow as fear." I don't hope that we have an unbounded future because I don't have to; we have an unbounded future. Dangerous--yes, very, and that's nothing new--but unpredictable. In my sense of sadness and loss, and in my studies of each new disturbing development, I'd forgotten this. I'd let the headlines define my sense of reality when, in reality, no definitions last for long and everything changes unpredictably. In dreams begin responsibilities--but perhaps also: in the unpredictable begin dreams.

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