

Fear and Anxiety

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Fear and anxiety are part of the human condition, not parts that we enjoy or look forward to, but powerful elements of human experience. While difficult to write about — how does one discuss anxiety and fear without inadvertently making them worse? — both are relevant to the current state of collective humanity and particularly life in America.

Let me start with fear, defined as an unpleasant, often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Collectively and too often individually, we are awash in fear. Fear of change. Fear of uncertainty. Fear of humiliation. Fear of loss — the loss of security, of identity, of normalcy, of life in America as it was painted in the sentimental narratives of belief, which are, of course, more myth than reality.

The world as it has been was never fair nor just. The amount of unnecessary human suffering is dreadful — though obviously much worse for some than for others. People take refuge from the suffering as best they can, in work, in family, clinging to the faith that those core values are what matter and how things really are. That's one way to make sense of life, even if that sense is frequently artificial and false. Our collective complicity in the systematic cruelty of "civilized" human life is something that most of us try to avoid, or at least not think about too much. For some, escaping the awareness of that savagery is impossible. For others, even entertaining that we could be so barbarous is too shocking and painful to consider.

What has happened in America over the past two decades is that the façade of normalcy, of things making sense and life being as it should, has come apart at the seams. The reasons why that has happened are complex, multi-faceted, interconnected in myriad ways, and cannot be stated simply. The result, however, is a feeling among a significant percentage of the population of persistent and increasing anxiety.

Anxiety (in common usage rather than as a medical or psychiatric disorder) is defined as distress or uneasiness caused by fear of danger or misfortune. Although I haven't seen the word "foreboding" used in any online dictionary definition, I regard the sense of foreboding and uncertainty about the future as characteristic of anxiety.

Not only has the present disintegrated into uncertainty, but the past and future as well. Many of us are discovering that America's past was never as we

assumed, believed, or hoped it had been, and certainly not as we were told it was. The illusions that held together our culture and society are unraveling before our eyes. And as the present and past make less and less sense, the future becomes ever more worrisome and frightening.

For some people, the loss of certainty and optimism is too disconcerting to bear. They seek to protect themselves in the present by returning to a mythic past that felt nailed down, a past that made sense to them, where life was orderly in ways that may not have suited them perfectly but confirmed their expectations and fed their hopes.

A hallmark of America throughout much of its history was the optimistic belief among a substantial percentage of Americans (especially white Americans) that their children could and would enjoy happier, easier, and generally better lives than they had experienced. Whether true or not, this feeling was pervasive. Not any more, however. Those days of faith, trust, and hope are gone. The shrinking of the middle class and the stagnation of upward class mobility have caused a sizable percentage of Americans to feel that they've been abandoned and left behind, particularly since they see the top 20% galloping ahead in wealth and privilege.

One result is anger directed at existing institutions and the elites who run them. This anger is understandable and, I think, based on largely accurate assessments of how America has changed. Turns out, however, that angry people are more easily manipulated by the very elites they despise.

For people who can't insulate themselves from withering anxiety or feelings of fear by retreating into work or family, another road out is through hatred. Hatred seems to be a peculiarly human emotion, linked to the Us-versus-Them tribalism that is genetically programmed into our nature. Hatred is tied to fear in that it gives us a simple, straightforward way to target a presumed culprit to blame for whatever threatens us, a scapegoat for our fear. In varying degrees, that animus has always been with us, but it's now erupted overtly and spilled over into the racial, political, and religious forms that are so convenient. The fact that such hatred is actually displaced aggression doesn't seem to matter.

When prolonged, fear can be numbing and even immobilizing. Hatred, however, is vibrant, passionate, and perversely enlivening. Medicine is a good metaphor here. If fear is the experiential symptom of a deeper disease, then hatred is like an over-the-counter drug that alleviates the symptom, like taking aspirin for a headache. The disease itself (the actual threat) remains untreated, and the aspirin may produce unwanted side effects, but at least the symptomatic pain of the headache is temporarily relieved. As an antidote to fear, hatred works.

That's what's happened in America today with the resurgence of hate crimes targeted on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. These are crimes perpetrated almost exclusively by disaffected young men who espouse white supremacy. Such young men are, almost invariably, "losers" in the cruel game of winners-and-losers that America has become. They are enlisted into the ranks of

hatred by online sites or social media platforms that stoke their fear of The Other as the cause of their losses. They are then emboldened to take violent action by a social climate of animosity and a White House that supports and approves their delusion.

Needless to say, acts of murderous public violence in what amounts to domestic terrorism are not the only threat that besets us today. In terms of fear for ourselves and our loved ones, however, anxiety is the new normal. America is no longer a dependably safe place, and that's not going away anytime soon.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous dictum, delivered during the depths of the Great Depression in his inaugural speech after being elected President for the first time in 1932, was "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*" I'm not sure it was true, but those words of inspiration resonated powerfully at the time.

In present-day America, that phrase wouldn't cut it. Now we have many fears, from the mundane (jobs, health care, etc.) to the existential (who is Us and who is Them?). Significantly, this includes the fear of each other.

Some politicians, particularly among centrist Democrats, talk of reuniting the country, of bringing all Americans back together as a people. Although I can understand why office-seekers would make such appeals, I think they're whistling Dixie. This country is nowhere near compromise, cooperation, or agreement, much less unity. Whether one loves or loathes the American Empire, it's clearly in decline. Rather than being defeated from external threats, the Empire is disintegrating from within through corruption, hypocrisy, and greed. Anxiety about the future is entirely reasonable.

The fears that are pulling us apart run too deep at this point, and they will continue to do so until a sufficiently urgent and immediate threat comes along to temporarily end the squabbling amongst ourselves. The last time that happened was 9/11, but that united Americans in the wrong way, toward vengeance rather than looking inward and re-examining ourselves. I hope that when the next major assault arrives, it won't fool us that way. I also hope that it won't be too terrible nor too late to matter.

How might we cope in the meantime? How can we maintain at least some sanity and grace in the face of withering fear and anxiety? By living each day as if it were our last. By loving as well, as deeply, and as sincerely as possible. By doing our work, both outer and inner. And by feeling joy in the wonder of life whenever and wherever it arises.

Don't hide or try to escape from the fear and anxiety. Don't deny them. They are real. But don't give in to them, either. Acknowledge that life is both wonderful and terrible. As much as possible, honor the here-and now with an alert mind and an open heart. Live every minute as fully as you can.

And make sure that all the people you love know that you love them.