

*astrological-cultural-spiritual-political
views & commentary...*

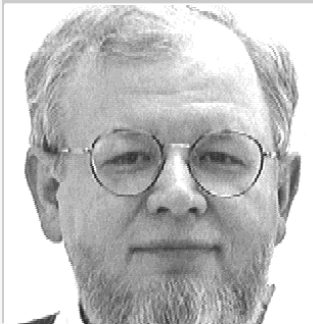
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THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

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Dear friends,

Numerous subscribers have emailed to ask if I would write about the recent earthquake in the Indian Ocean and subsequent tsunami that struck coastal regions along the Indian subcontinent. I had not intended to do so, in part because my take on this natural disaster is unlike most of what I've read and seen. A different, more historical perspective may be instructive, however.

MOTHER NATURE'S WRATH?

In our lifetimes, and specifically over the past 60 years, concerns about an imminent apocalypse have increased dramatically as a disturbed vibration in the body politic. And why not? The possibility of terrible disaster—whether natural or man-made—of sufficiently catastrophic proportions to either decimate civilization or end completely the brief and vainglorious reign of our species on this planet has become palpable. The stereotype of the bearded, sandaled idiot savant walking the streets carrying a homemade sign proclaiming “Repent! The End is Near” no longer provides comic relief or scoffing disdain. Once the territory mainly of the lunatic fringe, hysteria about unimaginable destruction has reached right into the heart of the collective.

Put aside for a moment the hubris of human beings in considering ourselves top dogs on the food chain of earthly biology. Proclaiming ourselves to be the “rulers” of business in this neighborhood is so silly as to be laughable. Yes, our big brains enabled us to develop sufficient technological power to alter the landscape of the global environment, but we are hardly the dominant species on this planet. That honor falls to bacteria and insects, which are very likely to outlive us and inherit whatever may be left of the earth's delicate ecosphere should we screw up (as we seem to be doing so royally).

I think often that human civilization can be summed up in the folly of its self-importance by the microcosm of the yearly Oscar ceremonies in Hollywood. A small and pampered group of filmmakers and actors get together to give themselves awards in an over-the-top celebration that is pompous, self-congratulatory in the extreme, and which seeks to convince the rest of us mere mortals that what these people do for a living is the crown of creation, as if acting were somehow more noble than child's play and movies the most significant endeavor in human evolution. Give me a break.

That strain of false self-importance runs throughout human nature. Whether we narcissistically consider ourselves God's gift or struggle with the neuroses of self-loathing, human beings tend to see ourselves as the center of the universe. Within the sphere of our own lives, that is, of course, true. But reality is worlds within worlds, all coexisting simultaneously. Considered from larger perspectives, we quickly shrink to specks of insignificance. A balanced and mature experience of life includes both viewpoints. The human path of Consciousness takes us to paradoxical extremes. Meanings are often passionately personal and coldly impersonal in the same breath. Unlike "lower" animals, however, where that duality is accepted without question as natural, human beings struggle mightily with the contradiction. We tend to forget one end or the other and must be reminded of the essential duality of self-importance versus self-transcendence through shocks and awakenings. One such awakening takes the form of obliteration, either real or imagined.

From an astrological perspective, the 18th century was largely Uranian in symbolic meaning, the 19th century Neptunian, and the 20th Plutonian. That is to say, the "progress" of human civilization was subtly revealed by the particular outer planet that was discovered in each century. (The 21st century may be Chironian, but that's a topic for another essay.) Of those three outer planet symbols, Pluto alone represents apocalyptic experience, and the 20th century released those potentials in ways far beyond the scope of any previous epoch.

In both numbers and sheer power, the impact of the human species reached critical mass over the past hundred years. The best and worst of what we are began to emerge, with results that ranged from inspiring to tragic, virtuous to debased. Scientific knowledge and technological development leapt forward. We started to unravel the mysteries of creation, discovering some of those aforementioned worlds within worlds in both the physical and the psychological realms. Sadly, though, our savagery did not diminish.

We could debate whether our best discoveries actually improved on the mythic understanding of earlier cultures—the Babylonian, the ancient Chinese, or the many smaller tribal cultures dotted around the islands, forests, and deserts of the world, to name but a few examples. We could debate whether our cruelty was more or less than our ancestors. What cannot be argued, however, is the astonishing impact of collective power that was unleashed.

In the 20th century, we left our planet for the first time, putting humans on the moon and bringing them home. That is just one of a host of remarkable developments that sparked wonder and hope. Unfortunately, the other side of the scale—our dark shadow—was as much if not more in evidence. We killed 150 million human beings in wars. One-quarter of all the plant and animal species that existed at the beginning of the last century are now extinct, due almost entirely to human corruption of the natural environment. If that's not apocalyptic, I don't know what is.

THREE STRAINS OF APOCALYPSE

1. Nuclear Annihilation (Human Aggression)

While the first half of the 20th century was a literal holocaust for faith in peaceful progress, culture, and the evolutionary supremacy of civilized behavior, the second half brought a more subdued psychological atmosphere of ongoing dread. The Manhattan Project punctuated the end of World War II with an atomic exclamation point and ushered in the Cold War with its nuclear arms race standoff. Every generation since has been inoculated with existential angst. Mushroom clouds are now part of our collective mythology. In dreams, who among us has not awakened in a cold sweat from a nightmare of atomic obliteration?

We went to the brink of nuclear armageddon at least twice in the past 50 years in confrontations between the Russian bear and the American eagle. Miraculously, we avoided pushing the launch buttons. Now, however, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and the increasing number of nations joining the nuclear club, the specter of a fatal "mistake" looms larger than ever. And, even more tragically, the rise of radical terrorism puts the whole deranged game of unthinkable weapons into a new and deadlier context. Depending on one's politics, that terrorism could be seen as the increasing militarism of the American empire, or the revenge of Islamic jihadists eager to visit upon us violence in equal measure as a response

to our meddling in their affairs. The technology of dirty bombs is easily accessible, aging stockpiles of still-viable Russian warheads and fissionable materials are insecure and vulnerable to theft or black market acquisition, and the will exists to do maximum harm to civilian populations.

For those who are well-informed about geopolitics, this is a real and serious threat to our future.

2. Fundamentalist Christian End Times (“The Rapture”)

The second strain of apocalyptic vision comes from the belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible, specifically from the Book of Revelations, where the Second Coming of Christ (“the Rapture”) will be followed by the End Times. Supposedly, Israel will retake its “biblical lands” only to be attacked by forces of the anti-Christ. All true believers (translation: Christians who have been saved) will then be lifted up to heaven, while those unfortunates who remain will suffer the torments of plague, pestilence, famine, and other disasters as our formerly wicked world is “cleansed.”

A 2002 poll by CNN/Time reported that 59% of Americans believe that these prophecies from Revelations will come true. Personally, I find such high percentages impossible to believe, but then I’m not very well connected to the middle of the bell curve. Have so many adult Americans actually succumbed to the spiritual equivalent of Disneyland? Don’t get me wrong: I think the teachings of Jesus are awe-inspiring, and the Bible is rich in wisdom and allegory, but this childish literalism of waiting to be magically “lifted up to heaven” while everyone else goes straight to hell is on a par with certainty that the Tooth Fairy leaves quarters under your pillow and that Santa Claus comes down the chimney.

Religious extremism is a conspicuous function of Pluto’s passage through Sagittarius from 1995-2008. Magical thinking and simplistic beliefs have always been vulnerable elements in human nature, but with Uranus moving into Pisces, such fantasies are now a collective phenomena rather than an occasional misunderstanding.

No one I know personally (including me) is completely free from infantile beliefs. That’s part of the human landscape. But the tent revival religious backlash now underway is nothing short of mass psychosis. Whether it takes the form of strict adherence to Biblical Creationism in Christianity or the equally bizarre conviction that 77 virgins await martyrs in an Islamic paradise, the current momentum of belief in such fictions indicates that religion—for all its supposed comforts and solace—has pulled millions into the belly of illusion, where madness awaits.

What’s most perverse about the particular fetish of End Times is that its proponents have no wish to prevent it. Since they will be “in heaven on the right hand of God,” they need not worry about the pragmatic challenges of peak oil or renewable resources, clean air or pure water. And it just so happens that a significant number of higher-ups in the Bush administration and Congress are either fundamentalist Christians themselves or sympathetic and politically beholden to that constituency. So their agenda actually may be to push forward the predicted apocalypse. Friends, that is downright scary.

3. Natural Disasters (Mother Nature’s Vengeance)

The third strain of those who worry about coming disasters includes a diverse set of individuals with wildly different sources for their concerns, including scientific environmentalists and ecologists; astronomers and physicists, and those of a New Age spiritual bent who are drawn to dire predictions from the likes of Nostradamus, Edgar Cayce, or the Mayan Calendar.

These people fear that, in upsetting the natural balance by polluting or destroying our life-giving environment, we will reap the whirlwind directly from Mother Nature. The list of possible disasters in this strain is long: devastation from global warming and accelerated climate change, the melting of polar ice caps and disruption of oceanic currents, death of the oceans themselves, ozone depletion in the upper atmosphere, floods, famine, earthquakes, hurricanes, and every other variety of natural disruption, including visitations from the outer cosmos in the form of asteroid collisions.

The recent earthquake in the Indian Ocean and the subsequent tsunami that so devastated the coastal regions of the Indian subcontinent have alarmed many people in this third category of concern.

THE INDIAN TSUNAMI IN PERSPECTIVE

Before I share my thoughts about the tsunami, let me state plainly that the event was a profound tragedy for all involved, whether they were victims who died, surviving relatives who suffered total shock and permanent grief as their worlds were destroyed, or, to a lesser extent, the billions around the globe who watched the grisly coverage from the not-entirely-safe distance of television.

The roots of the word *compassion* mean literally “to suffer with.” Empathy can be either joyful or painful, but compassion is always tied to suffering. Anyone whose heart is open feels deep compassion for the victims of this disaster.

Beyond compassion, however, this recent event has produced in some people a lingering trauma, even a sense of impending doom. Is this the first clear salvo in what many fear to be the coming devastation of Mother Nature’s Wrath?

My answer is **no**. This was not a warning. That’s not to suggest that Mother Nature won’t wreak havoc in years or decades to come; She may still shake off the “toxic infection” of a human species gone bad like a dog shakes off fleas. But **this** event is not, in my opinion, the harbinger of that particular apocalyptic fear.

Considered from the standpoint of history, and recent history at that, the earthquake and tsunami were fairly mild as natural disasters go.

How significant was the earthquake that touched off the tidal wave? Well, by comparison in magnitude with other earthquakes over the past century, it was noteworthy but not overwhelming. At 9.0 on the Richter Scale, this was only the fifth biggest earthquake of the last hundred years. Earthquakes happen all the time. Tectonic plates shift, eruptions occur, and Mom does her magma dance of creation-destruction.

All right. If the earthquake wasn’t the most intense, then how devastating was the subsequent tsunami in terms of human loss? Well, compared to other earthquake disasters, this was the worst in about 40 years. Three earthquakes in China—in 1920, 1927, and 1976—killed more than 200,000 each (some sources suggest that the Tangshan earthquake of 1976 killed up to 600,000). A smaller quake in Japan in 1923 killed about 150,000.

Compared to natural disasters of all kinds over the past hundred years, however, this one was downright modest. The 1970 Bangladesh typhoon killed between 600,000 and 1,000,000, depending on which sources one cites.

The greatest natural killer in recorded history occurred less than a century ago—the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19. Coming on the heels of the end of World War One, the so-called “Spanish Flu” is often overlooked in collective memory, but it was devastating. Starting in America, this killer virus spread around the globe like wildfire. In 18 months, **20 to 40 million** people died. The pandemic was so fast and lethal that no one is sure of the actual number of deaths worldwide. That scourge killed more people in one year than the total number who died over the four years of the more infamous “Black Death” Bubonic Plague in Europe from 1347-1351. And yet, most people alive today are unaware that the Spanish flu ever happened.

And finally, we can include three almost unknown famines in the Soviet Union and China. Though not strictly natural disasters, these were the result of droughts aggravated by staggering state incompetence in shifting economic resources away from agriculture and toward industrial development. Two famines in Russia, in 1921 and 1932-33, killed together an estimated **12 million** peasants. Then in China, the epic bungling of Mao Tse-Tung’s Great Leap Forward produced a truly unimaginable famine in 1958-61, where **30 to 40 million** Chinese died of starvation. A disproportionate number of those were young girls, who were not valued in the Chinese political climate of that time. News of these famines was kept as secret as possible in both totalitarian societies and went almost unreported in the West until decades later. Even now, the full extent of the tragedies is still largely hidden.

So, when evaluating this past December's tsunami, keep in mind these other events of mass human suffering, many of which occurred in our lifetimes, but without so much as a ripple in our awareness. Consider also the possibility that the deeper significance of this recent tragedy may lie not in disasters at all, but in the question of what we know versus what we don't.

McLuhan's Electronic Global Village—where what happens anywhere can be instantly transported everywhere—has come to pass, but only partly, due to the caveat of certain very intentional filters. As a mass audience, we are shown only what our rulers want or allow us to see.

The tsunami was splashed across our televisions and computer screens for weeks. Market competition for eyeballs is extremely fierce, and the news media didn't hesitate to play to our heartstrings as well as our fears. Even more important, this tragedy was "safe" for the media to report because America didn't cause it. That stands in bold contrast to the ongoing military madness of our own creation in Iraq, whose incrementally mounting death toll is an ongoing slow-motion tragedy. The staggering number of Iraqis killed during the past two years of war—up to 100,000 by some estimates—is not broadcast because doing so doesn't serve the powers-that-be in George Bush's hallucinatory regime. Similar news censorship applied to minimize the public's awareness of the half million or so Iraqis who perished from twelve years of bombing and economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by previous American administrations. Media megacorporations are careful not to bite the imperial hand that feeds them, however murderous that imperial hand is.

To those who emailed me asking about the spiritual implications of the Indian tsunami, I would advise caution in reading into this natural disaster any transcendent meanings, other than the sporadic jolt of reawakening our Consciousness to the fact that we are all subject to immense forces beyond our control that can intrude at any time to change our lives forever. This kind of event is simply what Nature does, and She does so with a shocking frequency from which we in America have heretofore been insulated and relatively unconcerned. Those days, however, are over.

Spiritual sages throughout history have reminded us to live as if this were our last day. We forget, of course, and act as if we're immortal, but we're not. Still, awareness of the inevitability of death should not mean succumbing to free-floating fears. Whether real or imagined, too much fear eats the soul. To counter that toxicity we need to be awake to the joy and pleasure in our lives, especially by honoring the love we share with those we know, and by the sympathy we feel for those we don't.

Take heart. To be alive is to have the possibility for ecstasy as well as suffering. We all endure pain when necessary, learning what we can from it, but a central element of the spiritual path is to remember that joy is precious, and to return to it whenever life permits.



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