

Eckersley, R. 2007. Don't panic – it's only the apocalypse. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-22 July, *Spectrum*, pp. 28-29. The end is nigh. Be positive. *The Age*, 22 September 2007, *Insight*.

## **Don't panic – it's only the apocalypse**

*How should we face humanity's problems, with nihilism, fundamentalism or creativity?*

*Richard Eckersley*

A few years ago, my then-teenage son and I were watching world news on television. An item began about the humanitarian tragedy in Darfur, Sudan (which is still with us). 'Can we turn this off, Dad?' my son said. I asked why. 'It's depressing,' he replied. 'I don't need reminding what a horrible place the world is.'

It is depressing, and it is becoming more depressing as our perceptions of the world and its future are increasingly shaped by images of global or distant threat and disaster: earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, bushfires, disease pandemics, war, terrorist attacks and famine. While these hazards are mostly not new, previous fears were never so sustained and varied, nor so powerfully reinforced by the frequency, immediacy and vividness of today's media images. This effect seems certain to intensify as global warming and other threats begin to impact more deeply on our lives.

Most of the attention on how we address these threats has focused on economics and technology. How we react psychologically will be just as important. This response involves subtle and complex interactions between the world 'out there' and the world 'in here' (in our minds). These have implications for both personal wellbeing and social cohesion and action.

Psychological research suggests that adaptability, being able to set goals and progress towards them, having goals that do not conflict, and viewing the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful are all associated with wellbeing. Biomedical research has shown that people become more stressed and more vulnerable to stress-related illness if they: feel they have little control over the causes of stress; don't know how long the source of stress will last or how intense it will be; interpret the stress as evidence that circumstances are worsening; and lack social support for the duress the stress causes.

Negative expectations of the future of the world and humanity are likely to impact on several of these states, most obviously by encouraging perceptions of the world as hostile and dangerous and that circumstances are deteriorating. These psychological impacts will, in turn, shape our social responses.

We are being drawn in at least three directions by suspicions of an impending Apocalypse. The 'business as usual' denial that has been the dominant response until recently is giving way to nihilism, fundamentalism, and activism. If this categorisation

seems too stark, think of the responses as tendencies or deviations from the norm, with subtle to extreme manifestations, and which can overlap, co-exist and change over time in individuals and groups. My intention is to highlight the way that people, individually and collectively, can respond very differently to the same perceptions of threat and hazard.

***Apocalyptic nihilism:*** the abandonment of belief in a social or moral order; decadence rules. At the extreme are today's youthful killers whose apocalyptic language conveys a message that 'in a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness', as a young prison literature teacher, Theo Padnos, told American writer Ron Powers.

What united his pupils were not their backgrounds, Padnos said, but their apocalyptic suspicions. 'They think and act as though it's an extremely late hour in the day, and nothing much matters anymore.' The adolescents were drawn to the mythic violence of movies and television, to stories of 'post-apocalyptic heroes just like they want to be – violent, suicidal, the sort of people who are preparing themselves for what happens after everything ends.'

Others respond in less dramatic ways to this sense of futility. They become even more determined to succeed, to be a winner at all costs, or lose themselves in the quest for pleasure or excitement. These lifestyles have their own hazards, including various forms of addiction. Nihilistic inclinations are evident at a more mundane level in a growing political disengagement: a focus on home and hearth, on 'tending our own patch'.

This strategy has its appeal. The happiest participants in his studies, social researcher Hugh Mackay has said, were 'those whose horizons were most limited, and whose concerns were unremittingly local, immediate and personal'. There is a cost, however. The sense of the world as threatening and hostile, and that ultimately we are all on our own, produces a fraying of citizenship and democracy, and a vulnerability to the politics of self-interest and fear.

***Apocalyptic fundamentalism:*** the retreat to certain belief (whether secular or religious); dogma rules. In an extreme form, this is 'end time' thinking, rife among fundamentalist Christians in the United States, in which global war and warming are embraced as harbingers of the Rapture and Christ's return to Earth.

Commentators are unsure how influential 'end time' philosophy is within the Bush administration, but argue the hard questions about Bush's religious convictions need to be asked. Philosopher Peter Singer says that the President's religious outlook is best represented by the Manichean idea of a force of evil in the world, with an apocalyptic Second Coming imminent and America as the divinely appointed nation set to destroy the forces of Satan. This response, and that of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups, could intensify as calamity deepens, possibly including a resort to the use of biochemical or nuclear weapons.

The growth in fundamentalist thought extends beyond religion. Neo-liberal economics, which underpins current political strategies, also represents a form of fundamentalism in its rigid adherence to an economic doctrine in the face of the growing evidence of its failure to deliver promised benefits. Fundamentalism produces a comforting certainty about life and a call to united action against threats, both moral and physical, but it also generates simplistic solutions to complex problems.

***Apocalyptic activism:*** the transformation of belief; hope rules. This reflects the desire to create a new conceptual framework or worldview (stories, values, beliefs) that will make a sustainable future possible. The counter-trend that this 'activism' represents is evident in surveys across the Western world that show many people are making a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values and way of life. Rejecting contemporary lifestyles and priorities, they place more emphasis in their lives on relationships, communities, spirituality, nature and the environment, and ecological sustainability.

All three responses are growing in social intensity, a head-to-head contest that, sooner or later, will shatter the status quo. Nihilism and fundamentalism represent maladaptive responses to threat, whatever their short-term or personal appeal. Because they do not address the root causes of the problem, they risk amplifying the costs to human wellbeing. As Jared Diamond has argued in his book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, such strategies have led in the past to the collapse of societies confronting environmental strains. Activism is an adaptive response, closely associated with the drive for sustainable development.

Studies by American researchers Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson reveal that about a quarter of people in Western societies are 'cultural creatives'. They represent a coalescence of social movements that are not just concerned with influencing government, but with reframing issues in a way that changes how people understand the world. Ray and Anderson say that in the 1960s, they represented less than five per cent of the population IN the US. In just over a generation, that proportion has grown to 26 per cent, they say. 'That may not sound like much in this age of nanoseconds, but on the timescale of whole civilisations, where major developments are measured in centuries, it is shockingly quick.'

Surveys on downshifting by the Australia Institute show that 25 per cent of Britons and 23 per cent of Australians aged 30-59 had 'downshifted' in the previous ten years by voluntarily making a long-term change in their lifestyle and earning less money. Contrary to the popular belief that they tend to be middle-aged and wealthier people, downshifters are spread across age groups and social classes.

Beyond those who are changing their lives are many more people who are thinking about it. Hugh Mackay, while noting the social dangers inherent in the process of disengagement, says many people are using this 'retreat time' to explore the meaning of their lives and to connect with their most deeply-held values. The gap between 'what I believe in' and 'how I live' is uncomfortably wide for many of us and we are looking for

ways to narrow it, he says. However the search for meaning is expressed - in religion, New Age mysticism, moral reflection or love and friendship - the goal is the same: 'to feel that our lives express who we are and that we are living in harmony with the values we claim to espouse'.

Similarly, British business consultant Sir John Whitmore has written that he is meeting more and more people in his work who secretly despise the system they are part of, deplore the lack of corporate values, and know their products and services are of little consequence. They would love to be out of it and doing something more meaningful, he says, but feel trapped in their expensive lifestyles. 'So they don their suit and tie and serve the system, but they glance more often out of the window. The spirit is stirring in such people, and they are increasingly asking themselves tough questions.'

The cutting political edge of Apocalyptic activism is the global development of what American social activist Paul Hawken describes in his book, *Blessed Unrest*, as the largest social movement in history. The movement is not hierarchical and does not have leaders and ideologies; there is no manifesto or doctrine.

Metaphorically speaking, the movement is humanity's immune response to political corruption, economic disease, and ecological degradation. 'The movement is not merely a network; it is a complex and self-organising system.' Hawken says the movement is made up of over one million organisations – maybe two – with roots in the environmental, social justice and indigenous movements: research institutes, community development agencies, village- and citizen-based organizations, corporations, networks, faith-based groups, trusts and foundations.

'It arises spontaneously from different economic sectors, cultures, regions, and cohorts, resulting in a global, classless, diverse, and embedded movement, spreading worldwide without exception. In a world grown too complex for constrictive ideologies, the very word "movement" may be too small, for it is the largest coming together of citizens in history.'

Futurists have noted both the human susceptibility to Apocalyptic ideas, especially at times of rapid change, and the mythic need for Utopian ideals, both of which are embodied in stories. Narrative studies has demonstrated the power of stories to transport ideas across time and space, construct meaning and identity, shape communities, enrich social life, define social issues, even put together shattered lives.

The defining question of our times is this: will we make it? There is a real and increasing possibility that global warming, resource depletion (including 'peak oil'), the growing world population, disease pandemics, technological anarchy, and the geopolitical tensions, economic instability and social upheaval they generate, will coalesce to create a nightmare future for humanity this century.

Avoiding this fate will depend critically on the stories we create to make sense of what is happening and to frame our response. A key task is to ensure these stories reflect, not the

decadence and despair of nihilism or the dogma and rigidity of fundamentalism, but the hope and energy of activism.

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