THE MYTH OF THE END OF THE WORLD

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I once read of someone (it might have been Bruce Chatwin) who was in the audience when Gregory Bateson gave a talk in London about the threat of nuclear annihilation. Ever the pedant, "Chatwin" rose during question time to remind Bateson that people had been fearful about the end of the world around the end of the first millennium, too. Bateson stared him down and replied, "Yes, but this time it's *real*."

The nuclear threat may have receded, but the state of the environment gets worse every time you look: fires in the last tropical rainforests, the oceans and atmosphere heating up, Antarctic ice sheets melting, toxic algal blooms in the rivers and along the coasts of every continent... In spite of the good work being done by many people, all major environmental indicators are deteriorating, some of them at an increasing rate – even at an increasing rate of increase.

We don't only think of the environment in literal terms. Even scientists invoke metaphor and simile to make what is happening comprehensible: the atmosphere is a greenhouse; forests are the earth's green lungs; ecosystems are our life support systems; development is a cancer spreading along our coasts; mother earth is being raped. The most extreme – and desperate – of these images is the idea that the earth itself is dying. Often this fear is implicit, as in "if we don't act now, then...", but it is very often in the background of environmental discourse, lurking behind our noble ideals and good works. It is the shadow of the image of the "whole earth" that beamed onto our tv screens in the 1960s with the advent of space exploration. This image gave a kind of literal or concrete reality to old ideas about the oneness of all humanity. Here we were, together on this little blue orb spinning through dark space. How could we not love our home; how could we do anything to harm it? But with this image of the

whole earth came the realisation that our fate is also one – that this little planet might just be a fragile thing needing careful handling if it were not to become unfit for life.[1]

Millenarian cults regularly prophecy the end of the world, and are ridiculed when it doesn't come to pass. The world's mythologies, too, are replete with fantasies of destruction – the Scandinavian Ragnarok, the Christian Armageddon – most of which are not, however, total, but instead predict a cataclysm followed by some kind of rebirth. As the Bateson vignette indicates, the environmentalists' fear is not even the only recent eschatological fantasy: there was much talk of planetary annihilation during the Cold War, culminating in the eighties with Reagan's damnation of the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire, and his belief in a "war of the worlds" in which the righteous would ascend to Heaven in a rapture, leaving a devastated earth to the rest of us sinners and heathen. And we might easily forget the apocalyptic fantasy in Marxism, with its fervent hope for a violent revolution which would see the destruction of the old order and the birth of a dictatorship of the proletariat.

But beyond these parallels, it is worth having a closer look at warnings that we are on the brink of precipitating irreversible and cataclysmic changes to the ecosystems on which our biological (and psychological and spiritual) survival depend. The first thing to note is that – pace Bateson – by imagining the end of the world we are locating ourselves in a long tradition of apocalyptic discourse. And as James Hillman reminds us, the myth we are in is the hardest to see through, and therefore the one we therefore regard as irrefutably real.[2]

This isn't to deny the severity of our predicament, but I wonder whether a mythic and psychological approach might help to insight current apocalyptic fantasies. For instance, I am aware that the doom-laden pronouncements of environmentalists involve a certain amount of rhetoric: things are bad, and getting worse, no doubt, but activists risk being perceived by the public as boys crying wolf, when

they constantly issue pronouncements about our fate if we fail to take a prescribed course of action.[3] And as Andrew Samuels has pointed out, there is a chronic depression within the environmental movement that is hardly likely to attract people to it.[4] Environmentalists might retort that they can't help it, they're just telling it like it is, but I wonder whether it isn't the other way around, too: that the movement attracts depressives who are (like the rest of us) trying to sort out their neuroses through their work and their social concerns.

Nevertheless, this newest form of doomsday rhetoric points to an entirely reasonable fear that the earth might cease to be habitable for humans. This is a horrendous thought for anyone who is not a suicidal misanthropist, and of course we defend ourselves against it in numerous ways – especially by denying the reality of the crisis we face. So we continue to choke the air and use up fossil fuels by driving our cars, create mountains of waste, pollute the rivers and oceans, and chop down forests as if these actions will not somehow come back to haunt us. Of course they do affect us, but we adapt: look at how quickly we got used to wearing sunglasses and sunscreen because the ozone layer is disappearing. This is one of the curses of environmentalism, that – unlike the outbreak of war, say – change is incremental, and in the short term at least, we are spared the full impact of our actions.

Joanna Macey's work (which draws on Robert Jay Lifton's theory of psychic numbing among trauma victims) has been especially useful in pinpointing the varieties of what she calls "environmental despair" – the "anger, fear, sorrow" that can, if unacknowledged and unchanneled, lead us into impotence. If, however, we allow ourselves to feel and express these powerful emotions felt around the fate of the planet, the acts of catharsis and group sharing can lead beyond despair to a mutual empowerment, as these negative feelings give way to compassion, hope, and positive action. As she puts it,

> Just as grief work is a process by which bereaved persons unblock their numbed energies by acknowledging and grieving the loss of a loved one, so do we all need to unblock our feelings about our threatened planet and the possible demise of our species. Until we do, our power of creative response will be crippled.[5]

This is good basic psychotherapeutic practice: give a voice to what has been repressed, and the energy that was used to maintain the repression becomes available for other purposes.[6] But my concern is that we can jump too quickly from our feelings about the state of the planet to prescriptions to save it – or in Macey's case, to the idea that opening ourselves to the pain of the world allows us to connect with other species and thereby to awaken or "shift towards a new level of social consciousness."[7] I would prefer to linger a little longer in the liminal land of despair, to explore what our fears and denials tell us about ourselves.

The first time I met Peter Bishop, my doctoral supervisor, he stopped me in the middle of some environmental rave and asked, "Why save the earth?" That question has irritated me ever since. When I ask it of students of environmental politics, I get a range of responses, from "for our children" (which is no good reason, unless the biological imperative is an end in itself) to the legalistic rhetoric (perhaps inspired by – American? – ideas of human rights and "the rights of nature") of "because we don't have the right to destroy it". What the group often comes down to, though, after hearing my responses, is, "I don't know why; it just feels like the right thing to do."

Why save the earth? Plants, animals, civilizations all die, even planets and stars; why not the earth? Sure, we appear to be greatly accelerating the natural demise of this minor planet of the solar system, but who is to say that our actions are not fulfilling a plan hatched by an inscrutible deity?

Of course this is mere speculation, and is not a responsible attitude to take in the here and now. But I wonder if the best thing we

can do for the earth isn't to go into this fantasy of planetary death. Short of the entropic end of the cosmos as a whole, it represents the most all-encompassing fantasy of destruction imaginable. Perhaps instead of group catharsis and rallying the troops we should let in this awful idea: make stories of it, ritualise it, visualise it, till it really hits us – yes, our earth is dying. What would we discover then?

First, we might realise that the things around us we rely on to give a sense of belonging in the world are not so permanent after all, and might easily disappear with the rise of the ocean or the warming of the atmosphere. This is a terrifying thought, and it is not surprising that on having such realisations we would want either to deny them, or to charge to the defence of the world we know and love. But what if we resist this response; what else might we find out about ourselves?

Much of our "love" for others, and perhaps for nature, for life itself, is really attachment to what we know and fear the loss of. There's a New Age saying, "If you love something, let it go. If it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was." The logic of the second sentence somewhat escapes me, but you get the drift: there is a world of difference between attachment and love, and to know what love is we sometimes have to let go of our attachment, and see what remains – or what comes back. So it is, perhaps, with our desire to save the world. Can we surrender our feelings for golden sunsets, autumn leaves and turquoise seas, and allow death and destruction to enter our imaginations of nature? This is not something our culture is not very good at; we try very hard to expunge death from our lives and our consciousness, and when it forces its way in, we do our best to hide it, to overcome it through heroic acts, or to project it onto others – Gorbachev's "evil empire", Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein – as embodiments of the evil that would sully our earthly paradise. When we take back these projections, when we see the capacity for evil and destruction in ourselves, we are less likely to romanticise nature as something *only* to be venerated and protected – like those primeval,

Edenic landscapes photographed by the late Peter Dombrovskis, which we would like to think are protected from human predations – instead seeing it as also being "red in tooth and claw'. Paradise is a place that never was – that is, a symbolic place – and nature should not have to carry our desires for purity and perfection.

I am getting at the idea that the way we imagine and respond to the state of the world is personal as well as social. That is, as well as internalising information about the world outside us and our experience of it, we project our own "stuff" onto the world in order to avoid fully feeling our own pain. For instance, psychologically, what supports and nourishes us in the most basic way can be said to be our "mother". Read this way, our fears for the fate of the earth as the basis of life are fears that the mother will abandon us. Many of us, of course, have had the experience in our infancy or childhood of a mother who is either unavailable or overbearing. I suspect that much environmental campaigning, while entirely rational on one level, is on another level driven by the fear that the mother cannot be relied on, cannot support herself and needs our help. While we have this going on internally, that's what we will see in the world, however effectively we cover it up.

On the individual level, to heal this neurosis we need to find a safe place to experience our feelings of helplessness, loss and longing. Then, once again, we are likely to discover that we *can* be mothered: that the world can, indeed, provide. It's a tough call, one that can take a lifetime to work through, but in my experience of the early stages at least, there's a tremendous relief that comes from not feeling totally responsible for the fate of the earth – and from realising that even if it dies, it won't be our fault: not only because we have done everything we could on a practical level to avoid it, but also because we don't expect the earth as mother to be all good, or all bad. We have a working ambivalence with regard to nature, as a "good enough" mother.

One more example of this projection of personal stuff onto the world. Someone at this conference told me that he had what he called an "apocalyptic mentality" till the age of twenty eight, whereafter he dropped it and was able to put down roots in the world and live a relatively mundane, and happy, existence. Before that, the threat of nuclear annihilation, coupled with a Marxist waiting-for-the-revolution belief system, which was further reinforced by his father's stories about the Great Depression and how it put people's lives on hold, meant that he lived a kind of provisional life, never committing to anything, never putting down roots because, after all, the end might be just around the corner. In a sense most of us are in this position today, with job insecurity and the vagaries of the global economic system as well as environmental problems. (How often do you hear young people say that they don't want to have children because they wouldn't want to bring them into a world like this?)

My point is that it's not just that we have to deal with all this stuff coming at us from the world we live in, but also that in some ways this stuff reinforces our personal neuroses, even quite suits us. This makes it really important not to live naively or reactively but to reflect on where we stop and the world starts. It's the reverse move of that marshmallow spirituality (often associated with goddess worship) that insists that "all is one", that all distinctions are illusory, the product of patriarchal thinking. I keep coming back to the maxim of transpersonal psychology, that you have to have an ego before you can let go of the ego. You have to have boundaries before you can void them, and if you don't, every little slight, every defeat for the ego will seem like an atom bomb, will destroy your inner world.

Allowing this fantasy of the end of the world, we might also realise that the earth will not die just because we have trashed it. Remember that there are two words for nature in Greek: one, *bios*, refers to the life that is born and dies; the other, *zoe*, is indestructible. Nature will always win, even after a nuclear holocaust, even if it takes

millions of years to re-establish a similar level of biodiversity (not to mention beauty). Fantasies of nature as a tremulous maiden who needs protection against the ravishments of man, or alternately as an all-good mother, tell us more about ourselves than about it. Anyone who has ever been caught in a storm at sea, or a hurricane or earthquake, knows that beyond the world of air conditioning, nature still rules – and that she, or he, or it, cares little for our fantasies of dominance. Sure, human interventions are now influencing the occurrence of natural disasters, but this just proves my point: ultimately we are not in charge, and nature will make us pay for our transgressions.

But it goes deeper than this, and more personal. When we allow ourselves to fully feel the death of the earth, we are, in effect, allowing ourselves to imagine the possibility that the foundations of our very existence are threatened. For some people, such fantasies might open up a yawning emptiness that is usually cemented over by our busyness and our little comforts. For others, imagining the end of the earth might cause such an upsurge of chaotic feelings that they are threatened with madness. But for many of us, if we allow ourselves to imagine the worst, we will discover quite spontaneously that there is something more or less solid beneath all the crap. This unchanging aspect of things – of ourselves – can then become a source of strength and inspiration. Then we can face the environmental shit the media spews at us daily and not be overawed, because we know that there is something beyond, or beneath, it: that nature will survive, and so will we, in some way that we cannot foretell: life after death. For me, this is a better way of discovering oneness with nature than all the elevated philosophies and well-meaning "shoulds" in the world can provide.

In 1988 Wolfgang Geigerich, a German Jungian analyst, published a book about the imagination of the nuclear age, in which he argued that the bomb, far from being an accidental discovery that we are now forced to deal with, is a concrete expression of the

imagination of our age, which is explosive in all sorts of ways: in the exponential growth of knowledge, the population explosion, the quest for new horizons in space. He also saw the violence of the bomb as mirroring the violent separation of good and evil in Christianity, and our consequent need to obliterate the darkness we cannot bear to face. Don't trash the bomb, he argued: the bomb is us, it tells us much about ourselves.[8] I have been trying to do something similar in respect of the fantasy of the death of the earth: instead of recoiling in horror, let us hold this image as long as we can, letting ourselves die into it, seeing what will emerge. The whole corpus and practise of Jungian psychology might be summed up in the words, "In shit there is gold". Let in the stench of putrefaction and death, and discover the wisdom, beauty and richness that lies buried within it. In such explorations are new myths made, myths perhaps even for our own end-time.[9]

REFERENCES

[1] Peter Bishop, "The Shadows of the Holistic Earth", *Spring* 1986, pp. 59-71.

[2] For proof of this thesis, look in vain through most encyclopedias or dictionaries of myth in search of the myths of the Christian West: *we* have history and literature; *they* have myths. And how many scientists, say, would be willing to see the Big Bang as a creation myth, comparable with myths featuring, say, a cosmic egg that is broken open, or a primordial ocean that is churned by the deities to produce the created world.

[3] I am assuming most of my readers are "green" in spirit at least; to most other audiences I would be one of the doomsayers myself.

[4] Samuels, *The Political Psyche* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 103.

[5] Macey, "Working Through Environmental Despair", Theodore Roszak et al., eds, *Ecopsychology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), p. 250.

[6] However, in the practice of the Council of All Beings workshops developed by Macey with John Seed and other deep ecologists, it can lead to animal species being pressed into service as little greenies, nobly and too rationally telling the assembled humans what they should do to save their particular ecological niches; and in the process usually omitting to express their instincts to eat, fuck and fight.

[7] "Through our pain for the world we can open ourselves to power. This power is not just our own, but belongs to others as well. It relates to the very evolution of our species. It is part of a general awakening or shift towards a new level of social consciousness" (Macey, op. cit., p. 258).

[8] Geigerich, "The Invention of Explosive Power & the Blueprint of the Bomb: A Chapter in the Imaginal Prehistory of Our Nuclear Predicament", *Spring* 1986, pp. 1-14.

[9] Since writing & delivering this paper I have come across a book which makes a similar argument. As the blurb to Michael Ortiz Hill's *Dreaming the End of the World: Apocalypse as a Rite of Passage* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1994) puts it, "Beneath the surface of destruction, Hill discerns a radiant & rigorous rite of passage with surprising 'news' for collective humanity." His message is psychological & redemptive: if "we do not take apocalypse into the psyche where it truly belongs &

suffer through it as a rite of passage, we will be compelled unconsciously to live it out literally to the bitter end... the apocalyptic rite of passage, by consciously bringing to fruition the most difficult realities of the twentieth century as they display themselves in one's soul, actually initiates one into the oldest values carried within human culture." (p. 158) Hill's primary sources are largely the apocalyptic dreams he has collected from numerous people, which he suggests frequently point beyond apocalypse to a rebirth of sorts. This mirrors my thesis closely, but I am not entirely convinced that the myth or fantasy of death and rebirth has been deduced from his sources, rather than being imposed on them in the way they are arranged & interpreted.