

Do Not Worship the Deities That Came Before the Fire

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When civil rights icon and former presidential candidate Jesse Jackson rode a spotted horse toward the burning barricades on North Dakota State Highway 1806, I finally started coming to terms with the end of the world.

Naturally, I already knew that epochal transformation was underway from, say, atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations, the extinction rate, or a cursory assessment of human behaviour. But the end of the world is inherently mythological, as is the human mind. We are creatures as hopelessly bound to our narratives as we are bound to our sexuality and our fear of snakes. Jesse Jackson, the burning tires and burning sage, the tear gas and acoustic weapons and rocket launchers, the drumming and the war songs – the moment only seemed plausible if one imagined it had been described in prophecy, and the prophecy subsequently forgotten.

It was a sufficiently mythological stimulus to provoke a conclusion which can be concisely characterised as: We are living in the story of the end of the world. This was somehow more palpable and psychologically meaningful than: *We are living at the end of the world*, or the more understated and strictly accurate: *We are witnessing a cataclysm without precedent*.

The fires people set that day, 26th October, 2016, in an effort to stop construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, were extinguished by the next night. Dreamlike encounters with celebrity were fairly common at Standing Rock – the Green Party presidential candidate arrives to spray paint bulldozers people are locked to, the guy who plays the Incredible Hulk in the movies wanders past your camp – and, leaving the barricades as he approached, I didn't even see Jesse Jackson. I just knew he was mounted on a horse a mile down the road, preparing to approach, and the mental image of it, in that warlike context, immediately took on a quality roughly akin to a many-armed deity wielding skulls and weapons, crowned by fire. It produced a decisive rupture from whatever semblance of the former world I was still clinging to.

Less concisely than: *We are living in the story of the end of the world*, the moment said: *The world we live in now will exist in relation to the old one as a dream to waking, as an unhinged hallucination to everyday consciousness, and whoever clings to the prosaic forms and conventions of the former world will be devoured by the new gods and monsters that are being birthed in its flames*.

Two years later, the impression seems justified. Clinging to the prosaic forms and conventions of the former world, people with respectable opinions occupied themselves, during the time we

battled the pipeline, with dismissing a reality television star as irrelevant – until that night, 12 nights after police extinguished the fires, when he was elected president of the United States.

It is not a trivial detail that this decisive, bodily sense of global change occurred in the presence of fire. Scientists and environmentalists have been refining their language of unprecedented suffering and intergenerational catastrophe for decades, and every instance of such communication – if the criterion for success is that one could walk down a street somewhere and it would feel like a social response of any kind was occurring, even one of mere acknowledgment – has failed. Some of the reasons for this are very immediate, rooted in the vicissitudes of current and recent politics and culture, but some of the reasons are fundamental, rooted in the human minds' intrinsic barriers to comprehending and functionally integrating the reality of collapse. Witnessing the fiery transformation of the highway into a battleground between what felt like mythical forces that day, I realised that on some level, despite years of avid engagement in climate science and having given up on any semblance of a normal life to fight the fossil fuel industry full-time, I too was subject to these intrinsic psychological barriers to comprehending something so vast; I was in denial about climate change.

The political, strategic form of climate denial, rejecting that it's happening at all, has somewhat monopolised the term denial, so that we can no longer talk about it in a more common psychological sense, in the sense that we simply *don't process* information that is too challenging. This can be observed in the ability of the human mind to completely suppress recollections of traumatic events, and it can be observed in non-human minds, in the dazed look that sometimes comes over prey animals' eyes when they stop fighting with a predator and mentally depart from the experience of dying.

My fiery revelation convinced me that, for most people most of the time, whatever our world-views, global collapse is simply beyond our emotional and psychological scope, if it is presented in non-mythic terms. The moment of psychological integration I experienced didn't occur because I was explicitly processing anguish over a doomed food system or an ocean populated only by plastic. I'd been doing those things for years. It occurred because I had a religious experience; and I didn't have a religious experience because I was seeking one, but because of *fire*.

A religious awakening born in fire is existentially valuable because it allows for comprehension of what we are experiencing, and it is also, at least potentially, utilitarian, because it allows us to overcome paralysis resulting from witnessing a truth we haven't come to terms with. It is the moment we stop negotiating with reality, stop thinking anything is too terrible to happen, and accept every outcome as possible – paradoxically, this moment of acceptance is also the moment our capacities become mobilised to affect outcomes. The human mind can systematically suppress memory of a trauma, but it can also heal, and when healing occurs it is associated with a phase of recovered memory and acute crisis, where the painful reality becomes absolute and all-encompassing before losing its power. One PTSD researcher describes the initiation of recovery as the moment one ceases rejecting what is happening and begins to flow with the symptoms. Fire is the stimulus that allows us to instinctively, corporeally experience the global ecological trajectory, and thus to flow with the symptoms.

This scientific notion recapitulates an ethical and spiritual relationship to adversity that is fundamental to traditional societies, a perceptual framework that candidly embraces the unbearable and emphasises overcoming pain by confronting it. It is a framework evident in texts like the Hagakure, which instructs samurai warriors to accept the reality of death and all its emotional consequences, to meditate on the image of one's own inevitable corpse and conclude that one is

already dead, before going into battle. It is a framework evident in the Norse *Ragnarök* prophecy, which tells us that Odin will fight the wolf Fenrir, will die in that battle, and the wolf will devour the sun, and tells us this in the form of a prophecy delivered to Odin, so that he must go into a battle to save the world knowing that both he and the world will die.

We don't need to explicitly recapitulate tradition, and we probably can't – we need to recapitulate the psychological resilience and agency traditions conferred on people. We need to witness our own truths and have our own religious awakenings in response to them. This statement is not predicated on any supernatural beliefs, but on the understanding that the cross-culturally recurrent modes of perception that constitute the religious mind reflect innate properties of human psychology, and that it is the religious mind which engages those realities, like death and the end of the world, that other perceptual states cannot encompass. The religious mind is attained through our evolved capacities as opposed to external divinity, but it is a distinctive, real perceptual state, which can't be described in terms of other domains of human psychology. One doesn't need to posit a deity to have a religious experience witnessing the fires that have come into this world; one only needs to witness them without some interpretive framework that diminishes their truth.

Arguably, conditions have recently progressed to a point where religious awakening in the presence of ecological collapse is possible, because we have recently entered the era where the planet's behaviour intuitively, undeniably feels apocalyptic, regardless of whether people have an interest in 'environmental issues' or not. 2017 was the first year wildfire smoke blackened the skies over major cities throughout the west coast of North America and made breathing painful for days on end, and the first year mainstream news outlets consistently used the adjective 'apocalyptic' to describe the fires. With respect to certain moments – like the hazy reddish-orange glowing sky over Disneyland, or the melted cars and dead horses of Santa Rosa, California – they consistently failed to find any other.

Most people will never have an emotional response to topics like species interdependencies or methane reservoirs beneath ice, but most people have trouble not coming to a conclusion like 'the world is ending' in the presence of a fire tornado. 2018 was the year the fire tornado came to California in earnest, a phenomenon of cyclonic winds created by fire which beget more fire, a vortex of flame towering hundreds of feet above the forest, accompanied by a roaring sound that only seems plausible if one imagines it was first described in a prophecy.

But if all that is required to have a religious experience is to witness the fires that have come into this world without some interpretive framework that diminishes their truth, there is certainly no lack of interpretive frameworks to do just that, and many of them have the tragic aspect of belonging to environmentalists. As the 2018 fire tornados raged in a more plausible image of god than is to be found in religious iconography,

California Governor Jerry Brown appeared on television to gravely intone, in his best we-must-band-together-to-save-civilisation-before-it's-too-late voice, that the fires were unprecedented, and that they illustrated the existential threat of climate change.

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which this statement to the public seemed likely to diminish people's sense of both crisis and awe in the face of what they were witnessing, made as it was in rhetorical modes born in the world as it was before Jesse Jackson rode to the burning barricades, and a reality television star became the most powerful person in the world, and Disneyland glowed a hellish red. The language of CO₂ emissions and existential threat simply cannot convey the elemental truth to be witnessed in the physical world. Like myself during the

years I fought the fossil fuel industry, Jerry Brown is someone who is both constantly engaged with the subject of climate change and in denial about it.

Environmentalism has a long history of converting intuitive and universal truths into cryptic and specialised ones. Long ago, the environmental movement established a trajectory to failure by assuming success required seeming reasonable, and that seeming reasonable meant using science. Armed with graphs of CO2 concentration curves and alarming statistics about rates of deforestation, the environmental movement has experienced constant dismay at people's adherence to competing, less rational cultural frameworks, failing to grasp that we are the very clear inheritors of one of the most effective modes of irrational reasoning in existence, which says: *God is enraged. God is the wind, and god is screaming. God is the fire, and god has come to remake this world.*

Crucially, however, while unprecedented fire certainly goes a long way to conveying wrath and judgement, it also conveys beauty and wonder. Finding a path through the fire means perceiving the fire with reverence, even as it threatens us with destruction, even as we give aid to those who have been displaced by it and grieve for those who have died. It means finding in fire some of the same joy and sense of connection with something vaster than ourselves that we find in the contours of mountains shaped by glaciers or the screaming of a mountain lion. It means exalting in the fact that the same fires that are unleashing extinction are also destroying the machinery of civilisation (the 2018 California fire season achieved for a week what 25 years of international climate negotiations, and more than a decade of state climate planning, never achieved for even a moment: It closed Interstate 5 and the adjacent railroad corridor, fundamental physical predicates of the consumer economy on North America's west coast).

One doesn't need to stand directly before a towering inferno in order to witness its truth. The sense of divinity lingers. Where fire tornadoes raged in the summer, there is now a landscape in which, unique among fire-scarred landscapes I have visited, one can walk for days, through drainage after drainage, and never once encounter a living tree. There are places with dead trees still bearing their dead needles, places with trees whose needles burned, and whole black mountains of nothing but ash, but this is the extent of the variation. The quiet is uncanny, and feels almost like the land itself is still in silent awe of the power of the force that visited it, and the silence spreads to human visitors, so that they find themselves lacking for words other than brief, repetitive phrases of astonishment.

It is beautiful.

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