

The Latest Catastrophe

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We are awash in a sea of momentous events. It seems that our worry muscles have just started trying to wrap themselves around one thing when another thing comes along. We hadn't begin to digest the shootings in Tucson when suddenly Tunisia was in an uproar, and we hadn't really focused on Tunisia when the unrest spread to Egypt. Amazingly, the pro-democracy activists won largely peaceful revolutions in those two repressive countries and then the unrest spread to Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Iran and Jordan. In this country, the protests against the assault of collective bargaining rights for public employees has spread from Wisconsin to Ohio and Indiana. Then there's an earthquake in New Zealand, where my Episcopal colleague Brian McGurk of St. Christophers had just gone for his sabbatical – he's OK, I hear. We are dazzled by a kaleidoscope of events.

When I was a child we had a board game called Star Reporter, in which we are reporters chasing stories all over the board, which was a map. If I remember, you drew cards for your assignment, and the highest value card was a catastrophe. The next highest was a disaster. I can't remember what was at the bottom of the list – maybe beauty pageants.

I don't think I have personally been involved in a catastrophe, but I was hit by Hurricane Hugo in Charleston in 1989, which would at least qualify as a disaster. Though my family evacuated, our house took in 23" of seawater in the first floor. We had shrimp in our living room. Our backyard was a tangled mass of uprooted trees. We were fortunate that the heavy damage was restricted to South Carolina, and thus trucks from other states were available to come in and help us rebuild our infrastructure. Even so, we were without power for the better part of a week and without water for several days, and my house didn't get fixed for seven months. We lived with piles of cutup trees and mud for weeks.

Hurricane Hugo gives me a reference point, something against which to measure the big things moving in other places. Because things happening in faraway places lack a scale to me. I have never been to Cairo, I wouldn't know how large Tahrir Square is. I think about how my life was turned upside down by one hurricane, but life in those places will never be the same.

This cascade of crises brings up a question that I've wrestled with much of my life: how do we decide what to worry about? How do we decide which thing is the most important? It may turn out to be the wrong question to ask, but it is one that pops up in m mind, so I'll start with it.

Because I think it's a question which occurs to everyone who tried to make the world a little better place, who wages the good fight against injustice and ignorance. I myself try valiantly to stay informed, and I think many of you do too. We trust in establishment media like NPR and the New York Times. Nowadays we dabble with the other news sources proliferating on the internet, like MSNBC and the Huffington Post.

The trouble is, the more we open our lens wide, the more we try to stay up with the world and in touch with what's going on, the more we are confused about what is most important, what story to follow, what to pay attention to.

Your may have noticed that in the last year, I have been paying a lot of attention to the US Supreme Court's ruling in Citizens United vs. FEC, the ruling that held that corporations have a free speech right to give unlimited amounts of money to influence elections. I'm sponsoring a warrant article in Chatham calling for a constitutional amendment, and I'll be speaking on this this afternoon at First Parish Brewster. This is partly because it is a thing I can get my head around, at least in part, because it spent so much time fighting for free speech as a lawyer. For many of you, it might make sense that I am het up about this, but your own passions take you in different directions.

When we enter a public conversation, and particularly a conversation among liberals or with liberal media, we often fall into a competition for what's the most important thing to worry about. To some extent this is fueled by egos competing for attention and by the needs of the media to get your attention and your dollars.

For example, I now have staked out a public position on the issue of corporations in our public life. If I want to advance my own interests, I will go about saying that the issue of corporate dominance is the biggest issue of our time, and therefore you need to pay attention to what I am saying and do what I ask. This is particularly common in colleges and universities – each professor gets to be an expert in a narrow field and then sets out to convince the world at large, and particularly the students, that this field was the most crucial and therefore they should all enrol in his or her major so lots of grant money would be flowing towards that department. In the news media, a cover story on Time magazine highlights the worry of the week and asks you to pay attention to it. Thus do media increase their circulation and get to charge higher rates to advertisers. I listen to NPR, and Sometimes it seems they present the worry of the hour.

The problem, of course, is that next week or next hour it will be something different, because our attention spans are not that great. So it may be that structural problems like the gradual disempowerment of the labor movement get ignored by media until collective bargaining comes to crisis point as it are doing this week in Wisconsin and other states. How many of you thought about the labor movement before two weeks ago? Many of the most important

stories are complex and subtle and have no news happening for months at a time. These fly under our radar.

In my lifetime there have been many changes to my own worry list. The environmentalists when I was growing up used to push pollution, cleaning the air and the water of chemicals and particulates. Then people realized that there was a more threatening force at work, greenhouse gases and climate change. Now carbon is seen as the biggest threat. Fighting racism was big on my agenda when I was growing up in the segregated south, and that fight is still being waged. But sexism has always been a sister oppression to racism, and in the seventies we turned our attention to homophobia as well as discrimination against the elderly and disabled. Despite a war on it in the sixties, poverty continues to be huge problem in this country and around the world.

But wait, shouldn't war and peace be at the top of the worry list? In my youth, I spent a lot of my energy opposing American involvement in Vietnam, as in the last decade I've spent a fair amount opposing our war in Iraq.

How about liberty? There's repressive dictatorships around the world which have just come back into our consciousness with recent events in the Middle East, though repressive dictatorships are hardly restricted to that region. There's international terrorism, which didn't concern us much in this country until we were targeted, and the Muslim version of terrorism which targeted us. There's fundamentalist religions and cultures which are opposed to modernity and science. There is globalization of the economy.

There is trade imbalance and budget deficits to worry about on one hand and insufficient recovery from the financial recession on the other. There is deregulation which caused the recession and the continued dominance of rapacious capitalism over our political system, meaning that effective regulation is politically infeasible, leaving our system vulnerable to another economic crisis in the near future.

The future has almost its own category on the worry list. TV and the Internet have decimated our attention spans; no one's reading books anymore; our schools are not teaching basic math or critical thinking; we're falling behind the Chinese and the Indians in literacy and math abilities.

Some of these additions to the worry list are new, but many have been around in one form or another for my lifetime. Are there any that have gone away? Well, yes. The threat that the world was going to be taken over by global communism appears to have receded. And the threat of nuclear annihilation has faded, though it is still present. We can confidently say that smallpox, once of the biggest killers of humanity, has been eradicated, and that great strides have

been taken against heart disease and a host of other medical problems that once shortened lifespans.

There have been real advances in health and in fairness and in peace and stability, in overall quality of life. When we contemplate the past, it is often with nostalgia, but few of us, if given the choice, would really want to live again in the 1950s or another era entirely such as the 20s, let alone the Nineteenth Century.

Yet the list of things to worry about is long and – this is the worst part – it just seems to keep growing.

And what I've run down here is just my list. We are not in any kind of uniformity in this meeting house, and many of you I am sure will have a different list. Some of the things I worry about might not even make your list, you may even see them as a plus, and you will have others to add.

And these are just the public or societal things to worry about. Many of us never get around to worrying about these because our private catastrophes and disasters take up all our worry space. Let's worry about that ice on our sidewalk out front. An accidental fall can mean a hospital stay and surgery and weeks in rehab. How are we going to deal with it without risking a slip? The neighbors who used to shovel and salt got tired of dealing with it and now go to Florida for the winter.

Medical worries are huge for many of us; financial worries loom for others. If we're not worried for ourselves, we're worried for a spouse or child or friend or someone in the congregation.

In the movie *Zorba the Greek*, Zorba the main character is asked by his American acquaintance whether he is married, and Zorba responds "Am I not a man? And is not a man stupid? I'm a man. So I married. Wife, children, house, everything. The full catastrophe."

The full catastrophe. Ordinary life is a catastrophe. Some of you may have read the book whose title comes from this quote, *Full Catastrophe Living*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn is a leader in a stress-reduction technique based on Buddhist meditation and mindfulness practice.

Jon Kabatt-Zinn said, "you can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." I said at the beginning that we are awash in a sea of momentous events. But whether we are in the water battered by the waves or on top of them is our choice.

How do we deal with our worry list? Last week I talked about the flight-or-fight response which is hard-wired into our nervous systems as it is hard-wired in the nervous systems of most animals. It is there for a reason – like anything else in our evolutionary heritage, it is there because animals that have it tend to survive and reproduce while animals that don't have it

don't survive. And as I said last week, humans can have these flight-or fight responses triggered by words as well as by smells and sights and sounds.

Words like terrorist and murderer, words like bankruptcy and ruin, words like thief and child molester. We can also have them triggered by abstract words like freedom, democracy, justice, poverty.

Worry is just an expression of fear, and fear is a normal and necessary part of our evolutionary makeup. Animals which are without fear are also without offspring if there are predators in their ecosystem. But our flight-or-fight response evolved to deal with dangers which presented themselves singly or perhaps in pairs. We can evade one hungry grizzly bear or shark. But when we are confronted with a list of worries we are likely to be confounded. If we try to engage emotionally with all of them, we might engage with none. If they don't represent an immediate threat to our well-being, we are likely to try to impose some emotional barrier to caring about them.

Many of us moved to Cape Cod because it represented a respite from the problems of the world. From this spit of sand jutting out into the ocean, most social problems of the rest of the country can seem remote. There is food in the stores, fish in the ocean, grass on the golf courses, and money in the bank account. What is there, really, to worry about?

Yet we worry, in part because we are engaged, through the old media and the new media, we are able to watch the demonstrators in Tahrir square or in the Wisconsin state capitol. And because we try to maintain an understanding of what is going on in the country and the world, we see the surface events as tokens of a deeper clash of forces.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's recipe for diminishing stress is vipassana, or mindfulness meditation. It starts with breathing. It is doing nothing creatively, it is trying to be strictly in the moment, it is focusing on the breath. Sort of like what we do here for a few moments on Sunday morning. And sort of like what Jennie is doing on Thursday evenings.

For me, mindfulness also includes critical intelligence. We all want to save the world, and there are many voices which will give you advice on how to do it. We need to listen to these voices but also ask ourselves what is at stake for them.

The reality is that there is a limited amount any of us can do, and if we are paralyzed with worry, we can't do anything. The flight or fight response tends to muscle aside critical thought. Where the situation is at all complex, generally the worst decisions are made in moments of stress.

My heroes are the people who look at the hurt in the world and look at their own skills and choose a small arena of action in which they can make a difference. I'm thinking of a lawyer friend who at the start of her career decided that she would devote her skills to bettering one very

specific class of suffering people: battered immigrant women. Besides representing them, she has gotten major legislation through Congress protecting them both from their husbands and boyfriends and from the Immigration service.

This is productive action; generalized worry is the enemy of productive action.

Last July I gave you a report from UU General Assembly and talked about the great smorgasbord of pressing social issues which were vying for our attention there. I posed the question of how we could choose which one was most urgent, and then I concluded that I had asked the wrong question. And I have asked it again today.

The great African American theologian and educator Howard Thurman said “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

In other words, ask amid this welter of action what you respond to. Pay attention, as Jon Kabat-Zinn would say, to your own reactions, to your own heart. Where is your heart engaged? Where is your mind engaged? Go and do that.

And then let the rest go. Not entirely, but let it simmer down so that it does not distract from the work you can do. Try to disengage. Jesus asks, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

Bill Schultz was president of the UUA and Amnesty International and now head the UU Service Committee. He has worked tirelessly for human rights, and he wrote a piece in the Huffington Post last week in which he lists some tough lessons for human rights advocates to learn from the revolutions now sweeping the Middle East.

He starts with the observation that George W. Bush was half-right. Bush justified the invasion of Iraq on the basis that once democracy was established in the Middle east, it would spread. This has proven to be true, but only when democracy wells up on its own, not when it is imposed from outside.

But his most important observation, and the one with which I’ll conclude, is that we need to realize that

“Much is beyond our control. To the extent that the recent revolutions were a result of demographics (lots of young people), economics (lots of unemployment), and the weather (lots of warmth that allowed for protracted demonstrations), those factors are beyond the control of human-rights defenders. The best we can do is nurture the soil in the form of things like training in nonviolent social change and the maintenance of international pressure. {we take our cur from what] the little bird said to the farmer who found him lying with his feet straight up in the air[; the farmer] asked what he was doing, "I've heard the sky is falling." "If it is," said

the farmer, "what good will your two little measly feet do?" "Well," replied the bird, "one does what one can. One does what we can." Every once in awhile with a lot of help from a lot of people, that's enough to make a revolution. "

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 6

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.