

Mom ... and the End of the World (a prelude of sorts to the Dark Hope series)

David R. Weiss – July 20, 2021

NOTE: in my last post I described some of my Mom’s slow descent into dementia. I won’t recount that here, but the heartbreaking inevitability of her future is the context for this piece, which, in fact, goes to a *much more* heartbreaking inevitability. This post will scare some of you. *It should.* But, if you read past here, please commit to read all the way to the end.

* * *

I don’t expect Mom to live long enough to see the end of the world. But she is teaching me more about it than you might guess. And that matters more than you likely suspect.

Because while I don’t expect to live long enough to see the end of the world either, *I do expect that my children might—and that my grandchildren ... almost certainly will.* So, it matters that I learn as much as I can, while Mom is still teaching.

I can fill this out in more detail in a future post what I mean about my children and my grandchildren. And, by the way, *I mean it about your children and your grandchildren, too.* But right now we need to have a hard talk. I suggest you sit down.

I’ve been following climate reporting for about six years now. I am not an “expert,” but I am a pretty savvy consumer of news. And the climate news is not good.

I’m now persuaded by science news coming from multiple vantage points that we are no longer hurtling toward some ill-fated “point of no return.” *We are, in fact, past that point.* And headed inexorably *into* widescale ecological and societal collapse. There *may* be a human future on the far side of these twin collapses, but there is *no avoiding them.* And there is as likely to be an *inhuman* future on the far side. And whatever lies on the far side will be such a different world, that is it only fair to say OUR WORLD IS ENDING. Soon.

Twenty years? Not likely, but possible. Forty? Too possible to dismiss. Sixty to seventy years? *Alas.*

I hope you are listening.

Bearing any untimely deaths, it is all too possible that my six children will live long enough to see the undeniable twilight of Earth as a bountiful planet and of human civilization as we have known it. Let me name them for you, because they are real people, and I lament the future that awaits them: Laura, Leah, Megan, Meredith, Ben, Susanna. Ranging in age from 25-40, in their lifetimes the massive fractures in our ecosystems and our social systems that are already opening though still (mostly) felt in other places will be in their backyards ... perhaps in their living rooms.

But it is for the sake of my nine grandchildren that I learn from Mom most fastidiously these days. They have names, too: Tomás, Kaleb, Waverly, Landon, Nora, Gretchen, John, Eli, Benjamin. They are all less than 15 years old, and I confess that I now expect they will spend some portion of their adult lives navigating *the wreckage* of the world they were born into.

Wildfires, drought, heatwaves, pandemics, floods, climate refugees, frayed and ruptured social systems will be ... NORMAL. By the time my grandchildren are my age (61) they will no longer even remember the world I knew as a child.

This is hard. And you need to *feel* its hardness. Before going on I suggest you come up with your own set of names of those *you know and love*—children, grandchildren, friends—who are 25-40 or under 15. And replace my names with your names. This essay is a love letter of grief to persons I know. Let it be so to persons you know, too.

We will wish we could’ve chosen a different path—although God knows we have mostly not tried much at all to choose differently while we could. We have (if we’re honest) mostly *not* listened to nature’s feedback. We have mostly allowed our future to be sold to the highest bidder (usually the fossil fuel industry, but other capitalist interests as well, and, of course, the rich). But at some point the day-to-day desperation of life will make finger-pointing a luxury we can no longer afford. Killing the rich may feel good, but it will NOT cool the planet.

We will inevitably “wake up,” albeit too late. Having “negotiated” with science to maintain convenience and familiarity as long as possible in the face of cries for urgent change, we will finally and frantically try to

bargain with Mother Nature herself. And we will discover to our astonishment-anger-anguish that, exactly as science told us about Mother Nature, *that bitch does not bargain*. Oops. Having loaded the atmosphere with so much carbon, and having over-stressed the whole planetary system on too many fronts, our last best measures and our most sincere efforts, are going to be FAR too little and FAR too late. *This world is ending*. Collapse is coming. Soon. And it is too late to stop it.

Now. Take three deep breaths. I'll wait. Take them now, please. Then we'll go on.

See, Mom's world is ending, too. Her cognition is collapsing. Bit by bit. And whatever combination of neurological drought, heatwave, hurricane, or wildfire is wreaking damage in her synapses *will not be stopped*. And yet, as I wrote in my last post, she remains worthy of compassion, kindness, care—and love—even amid my grief. Even amid the heartbreaking inevitability of her tomorrow. And I will meet the cataclysm unfolding in her with cheerful banter, a smile, maybe even a song. I will throw joy to the wind. For love.

This is what Mom is teaching me from within her dementia: that it is in mid-collapse that we discover the fulness of our own humanity ... or we meet the despair inside us that has merely masqueraded as life up until now.

One common reaction to people who state the future as bluntly as I have, is “How can you say this?! You mean there's no hope?! You're asking for abject despair! Why should we even go on?!”

Okay. I say it because I'm persuaded it's true. And we do ourselves (and our children, and—dammit!—our grandchildren!) *no favors* by continuing to run as fast as we can into an ecological brick wall. If collapse is inevitable—and I'm telling you, it is—we might at least attempt to slow down and brace ourselves. And if we care about those who will be here ... *after*, then that care counts as hope, and it will manifest itself in forms of compassion and kindness that will be far grittier than we thought ourselves capable of, but which may yet “save the day.” (Where “save the day” does NOT mean avoiding catastrophe, but meeting it with fierce resolve and grace and character ... and hope ... and love. And doing these things will be nothing short of a miracle in the midst of a society that has placed such goddamn faith in guns.)

I am not giving up. Not on Mom—who will receive my best love and more for the rest of her life. And not on humanity—least of all on the fifteen beloved humans called out by name (or the many others known by name and loved by heart).

What we do from here on out is akin to weathering a pandemic—but with even higher stakes. (And if 2020 was a trial run ... we're gonna need to up our game.) We cannot turn it aside. But we *can* take steps, both level-headed and kind-hearted, to bring the best of ourselves into play day-by-day. For the sake of all of us. Even though we don't know how bad it will get. *We may yet lessen the degree of catastrophe, but we cannot any longer turn it aside*. We may—perhaps—have a vote on whether “catastrophe” is in 12-point font ... or a 72-point bold print headline. But we have bought all the letters for the word, *and even our best choices now will not be able to unspell it*. Mother Nature is *not* vengeful, but she *is* painfully deliberate, and her math is unforgiving. We bought each letter, and now she is doing the math.

That doesn't make our choices less meaningful. *It means the full weight of hope rests upon them*. God help us should we not rise to meet this moment.

Our choices—yours and mine—are *right now(!)* determining the scope of the cataclysm that *will* engulf us. And these choices *will* determine the chances that those beloved ones who come ... *after* will emerge on the far side with their humanity intact even if many of our cherished societal institutions are not.

Science matters more now than ever. Politics matters more now than ever. Arts and literature matter more now than ever. Family, friendship, and network of human community matter now more than ever. And religious faith, in its most noble this-worldly dimension, matters now more than ever. Each of these has the ability to inform the love, the hope, the grief, and the joy that can carry us through.

The end of the world is soon upon us. And I am learning how to meet it from Mom. I hope you're listening in.

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Delivering Dark Hope: It's a Dickens of a Time to be the Church

David R. Weiss – July 26, 2021

NOTE: I always put the link to my Patreon website in my byline at the bottom. Ongoing modest support for my writing (even at \$2-10/month!) makes a BIG difference. Besides keeping me clothed (which even Margaret thinks is a good thing), monthly pledges are a huge emotional-spiritual boost, letting me know my words are valued. I don't put any of my writing behind a pay wall. *It's all gift*. Over the next decade it may be among the most important gifts you receive. If you can support me with a monthly gift I'm grateful. In any case, *please read—and please subscribe*.

* * *

Sometimes an essay (or a whole tangle of essays!) gets caught in my gut for days. I try to will it up and out into the world, but there's another part of me that says, pleadingly, "No—please, can I have some other words?" My fingers move haltingly about the keyboard. Okay, in truth I'm a one-fingered typist, so it's mostly my index finger that hovers stubbornly above the keys, as though its solitary act of authorial defiance could force another future to present itself. To no avail. So here we go.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair." ~Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Dickens had no idea.

A couple weeks ago I was part of a conversation at my church in which we were asked to say a few words about how we envision our congregation doing ministry—ten years out. Of course, that's an invitation to "think big," to imagine all the exciting things we *could* be doing ... if we started dreaming right now. So I did.

I said something to the effect that I imagined us serving as a hub of urban healing and hope in a world—and a city—being undone by stresses that will make 2020 seem like a stroll in the park. ———
Oops. You can usually count on me to find the crickets in a room.

But I *was* dreaming BIG. Given the size of our building and its location on Summit Avenue, coupled with strong pastoral leadership and an engaged laity, we could be uniquely positioned (geographically, socially, and theologically) to BE *good news* (we Christians, say *gospel*) in a collapsing world. Granted, it won't be easy. Collapse isn't going to be easy. And bearing gospel in the midst of collapse, well that's going to take a miracle. So, churches better show up.

Of course, there are other options. Churches might prefer to continue trading polite pleasantries: preaching love and kindness and opining for mercy and justice, while pretending that the challenges we face are simply "more of the same"—variations on the past extended into the future. That view won't be sustainable for too much longer, but it *might* (and in some churches, no doubt, will) last the next decade.

But as global civilization begins to undeniably teeter on edge, and rumors of encroaching doom come to dominate our headlines, some churches *might* (and some, no doubt, will) choose to simply comfort their own, offering funeral services of a sort to both culture and society as they fray. Other churches *might* (and some, no doubt, will) heighten the promise of heaven, inviting their followers to place their hope in a next life—maybe even to imagine sort of twisted Providence in the apocalyptic suffering unfolding in this one.

Worse yet, still other churches *might* (some, no doubt, will) choose to ally themselves to fear and hate ... and guns. This is happening *already* in right wing faith communities (calling them "evangelical" inverts the very meaning of the word—so I won't) that opt to *worship* whiteness and wealth, capitalism and consumption while still mouthing the name of Jesus. These churches have entirely abandoned the biblical God and have utterly betrayed the witness of Jesus. But they continue to thrive by sowing a very dangerous fashion of faith in human hearts. And their numbers will likely grow.

So, there *are* options. Even as the future unfolds ... and fractures in front of us, churches will have choices to make. There is no "one thing" that is needful. Unless. Unless they truly desire to bear good

news—embody gospel—for their communities in the years ahead. If that’s their goal—and I ache with holy longing for that to be my church’s goal—then they will need to learn how to *deliver dark hope*.

By now you should have a bunch of questions. I don’t have a matching bunch of answers, but I can clarify a few things. Over the next ten days.

Sometimes it helps to pace yourself (and myself) for an arduous journey. So, thanks to a ten-day challenge thrown down by a colleague, I’ll expand on these thoughts over the next ten days (I’ve budgeted in time to write a sermon as well). Here’s where we’re going:

Day One (today) – On Delivering Dark Hope: setting the table. Check.

Day Two (Tuesday) – Collapse: the bio-physical roots of our predicament. In which I set forth what I see as the damning “hard science” evidence for why eco-social collapse is now a foregone conclusion.

Day Three (Wednesday) – Collapse: the psychic-social-cultural roots of our predicament. In which I set forth, drawing provocatively on Trauma Management Theory (grounded in Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death*, 1973), what I see as the equally damning “soft science” evidence for why eco-social collapse is now a foregone conclusion.

Day Four (Thursday) – Dark Hope: the need for a hope that can—at least—*abide* in unknowing and tumult. In which I argue that this most necessary hope is of a sort that White Americans have virtually no acquaintance with. With a bow toward Bonhoeffer’s decision to go through the war *alongside* his fellow Germans even as he resisted the Germany government.

Days Five and Six (Friday and Saturday) – Sermon Interlude: On being the church that we’re *called* to be. In which I explore Paul’s understanding of Christian community as a community where everyone—especially those at the margins—has a role in shaping who we are and how we meet the future. (No sneak peaks, but I’ll post this after I preach it.)

Day Seven (Sunday) – Dark Hope: on the quintessential value of justice work even *and especially* in a world that’s unraveling. In which I explain why—even as climate breakdown becomes an all-encompassing reality, that reality *encompasses* justice work; it doesn’t supersede it.

Day Eight (next Monday) – Dark Hope: on lament-compassion as the defining virtue of Christian faith (actually of *human* faith) in this time. In which I suggest that lament-compassion is the “swiss army knife” of authentic community in the coming years. Indeed, *it has always been so*, but we’ve had the damning privilege to pretend otherwise. In the future, this virtue will make or break human survival.

Day Nine (next Tuesday) – Dark Hope: on claiming our children as the blessing they are. In which I address head on the awkward *agonizing* dilemma of acknowledging that we *will* bequeath to our children a world so deeply wounded that *all their lives* will be necessarily given over to its care—or to despair. And thus, we owe them, with all the love we have, to equip them for this work.

Day Ten (next Wednesday) – Dark Hope: on the declaration that ... AND YET ... there is cause for joy. In my mind, we are unquestionably and irrevocably careening toward eco-social collapse. And we have precious little time to get our shit together before our world comes unmoored. *We ought* to feel frantic and prone to frenzy. And yet—it remains possible to live our lives well and with purpose even now. Dark hope declares that we remain worthy of moments of joy.

Ten days. Stay with me. Please.

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Collapse: the Bio-Physical Roots: Delivering Dark Hope #2

David R. Weiss – July 27, 2021

This is #2 in an eight-essay series over the next ten days in which I'm thinking out loud and a bit on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. It will be a much longer project to fully develop these thoughts (maybe eight *years*), but I want to offer this as an overview of sorts. (Here's a link to [essay #1](#); if you missed it, *start there*.)

In this essay I set forth very briefly what I see as the damning “hard science” evidence for why eco-social collapse is now a foregone conclusion. I am NOT a climate scientist. I don't pretend to speak with authority on the science of the climate crisis. I read the same news that the rest of you do, although I likely read a bit deeper and wider on climate crisis than many. I've followed this topic closely for the past five years; in 2019 I spent an entire year blogging weekly about climate and related issues.

Last year, I put much effort into addressing the pandemic, racial justice, policing, and our frayed democracy. Those issues (and others) have *not* lost importance, and I'll continue to write about them. But *my calling* is to write into our coming climate tumult. It's all connected, and I care *deeply* about all of it, but this is my corner of that connectedness, and I'm going to focus my energy here.

Four things, no five, fed my sense of urgency this summer. (1) News from a leaked IPCC report; (2) recent research on the 1972 Limits to Growth project; (3) a study that set resource depletion in a race against technological development; (4) an interview with a leading theorist on planetary boundaries; and (5) the sweep of 2021 summer weather calamities from heat dome to drought to flood to wildfire. Compounded on top of one another, the overarching sense is that the window of our opportunity to avert collapse ... has closed.

What remains is the opportunity to brace for collapse—and to fashion communities that might harbor and sustain humanity under conditions that will be more challenging than any of us have EVER known. I now regard this as a holy task, and I commit myself to doing all that I can to assist in this sacred work.

I don't claim that these five perspectives are definitive or even unique. Similar reports are everywhere if you look. Nor is this sense of collapse entirely new to me. I've had intuitions of this since first immersing myself in climate literature six years ago. But my encounter with these pieces in close proximity over the past several weeks made the ground shift beneath my feet. I won't offer complete summaries here, though I may return to them at greater length in future posts. Here is the gist of each piece.

(1) In late June Agence France-Presse, an international news agency based in Paris, reported on a leaked advance draft of a four-*thousand*-page 2022 IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report.¹ With many authors representing multiple disciplines and viewpoints, and crafted over months, even years, the process by which IPCC reports are written is *structured* to produce a broad-based and moderate consensus.

The broad-based consensus view in the leaked draft is anything but moderate. It speaks of life on Earth being “fundamentally reshaped” by climate change *even if* we manage to cut greenhouse emissions. It notes we are doing irreparable damage to the forests and oceans, our best natural allies in reducing CO₂. And while the report acknowledges, “Life on Earth can recover from a drastic climate shift by evolving into new species and creating new ecosystems,” it adds bluntly, “Humans cannot.”

The IPCC report shows that the impacts of climate change—the ripple effects felt across ecosystems—are already happening at just a 1.1 degree Celsius increase over the pre-industrial era global average. The Paris agreement had initially hoped to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees (a threshold the World Meteorological Organization now says we may cross for the first time before 2026). Ultimately, the signatories *pledged* to stay well below a 2 degree rise, but only secured policy commitments to limit it to 2.5 degrees. But even those commitments aren't being met; we're currently on track for 3 degrees Celsius. At best. Anywhere between 1.5 and 2.5 degrees will rewrite ecosystems, animal species, agriculture, human migration, and political instability. Beyond 3 degrees (and perhaps sooner) the infrastructure of a global civilization will collapse.

¹ <https://phys.org/news/2021-06-climate-impacts-sooner.html>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jun/23/climate-change-dangerous-thresholds-un-report>.

Finally, the IPCC report identifies a dozen “tipping points” where crossing a threshold in one realm (like temperature increase) results in a cascading effect in other realms (like loss of ice leading to rising sea levels and so forth). Tipping points are almost impossible to predict with accuracy, but once crossed, they may be entirely impossible to recover from. *Catastrophic climate change*—not just for “polar bears and poor countries” but *for every living being*—is on the table per the IPCC. Perhaps not yet chiseled in stone, but written in indelible ink with every passing month. “The worst is yet to come, affecting our children’s and grandchildren’s lives much more than our own.” When that’s the moderate consensus, something has changed.

(2) You may recall a 1972 MIT study commissioned by the Club of Rome (an international humanitarian think tank of sorts) that looked at “The Limits to Growth.” Considering primarily the interplay between population growth and resource depletion, the study came to the sobering conclusion that if the world continued its present rate of growth in consumption and population, societal collapse would occur beginning around 2040. Although the final report helped spark the environmental movement, it was largely dismissed as alarmist by mainstream pundits.

Recently a Harvard graduate student did an analysis using objective historical data compiled from 1970-2000 to ask how closely the original report had been in modeling the first thirty-year period after its publication.² Answer: *almost exactly*. We’ve done a bit better than predicted at avoiding resource scarcity—but only because we’ve become technologically adept at stealing finite resources from future generations. Still, under the “Business as Usual” model—which we seem determined to follow (even the Green New Deal barely makes a dent in Business as Usual)—we’re “on target” to trigger an economic collapse in the next decade, with a subsequent winnowing of population. Winnowing. That’s a gentle word for a mass die off of human beings.

There *is* an alternate scenario called “Comprehensive Technology.” It would also lead to the end of economic growth, but, via enormous and difficult technological innovation and transformation—the type that requires a decade or more of “wartime” cooperation and sacrifice (how did that go during the pandemic?)—we could avoid social collapse. To sum up, then: our current model of capitalism WILL die in the next 20-30 years, one way or another. Because: finitude. The question is whether we lay it to rest, or whether it takes a whole bunch of us out with it. In the global economy, unbridled capitalism is like the presumed right to bear arms. People are more than willing to die for it. My guess is billions of us will.

(3) Then, as if those two reports weren’t enough to press the air out of my lungs, I “read” a dense mathematical study that basically asked this question: “Since we’re on track to consume so much of the renewable resources on this planet that its capacity to renew itself will collapse, can we advance technologically fast enough to be able to leave the planet before we’ve killed its capacity to support us?” The math in this paper was beyond me, but it’s a peer-reviewed study, meaning that folks who could follow the math agreed it was sound.³

Using deforestation as an objective measure of resource depletion and projecting technological development along an array of trajectories—10,000 of them tweaking variables this way and that—they “conclude from a statistical point of view that the probability that our civilisation survives itself is less than 10% in the most optimistic scenario.” In fact, they surmise we have only “a few decades left before an irreversible collapse of our civilization.” And they observe that such a collapse would hardly be neat and tidy—rather, messy, disordered, and brutal. They end on a note of mildly cautious hope: “Giving a very broad meaning to the concept of cultural civilisation as a civilisation not strongly ruled by economy, we suggest that only civilisations capable of a switch from an economical society to a sort of ‘cultural’ society in a timely manner, may survive.”

In short, my argument for Dark Hope is that only if churches and other authentic communities choose to invest all their energy in shifting their people from a culture ruled by economy to one shaped by compassion, *only communities that manage this have any chance at all for survival*.

(4) You’ve had enough, but I was still reading—an interview with Will Steffen, professor emeritus of Earth System science known for his work in developing a theory of “planetary boundaries.”⁴ These boundaries map nine interacting Earth systems that play key roles in maintaining a planet hospitable to human life—as the

² <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3xw3x/new-research-vindicates-1972-mit-prediction-that-society-will-collapse-soon>; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/25/gaya-herrington-mit-study-the-limits-to-growth>.

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-63657-6>.

⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2021.1940070>.

Holocene period has been for the past 12,000 years. When we transgress these boundaries (as by loading more than 350ppm of CO2 into the air) we begin to play Russian roulette with the planet. And since these systems interact, transgressing one boundary can set others off balance as well. Transgressing a single boundary doesn't "break" the planet, but each boundary we transgress—especially as we do so to a greater degree (CO2 is currently around 417ppm)—effectively adds a bullet to a chamber.

Steffen and team estimated in 2015 we had transgressed FOUR of the nine boundaries—including the two central ones: climate stability and biosphere integrity. He expects that their current analysis will show that we've now transgressed SIX of the nine boundaries. Imagine, it's a nine-chamber gun, and by the end of 2021 we'll have loaded six chambers with bullets. *And we are passing THAT gun to our children and grandchildren.*

(5) Finally, I didn't read this so much as I watched it. Scorching heat in the northwest. Wildfires to the west and north that made my skies hazy and my throat scratchy here in Minnesota. Floods in Germany and China. Drought widespread across my entire state and over 40% of the United States. We sometimes see these as isolated events, tragedies but mostly disconnected to the wider world. Our global economy is *designed* to buffer the privileged while exposing the vulnerable. All the food lost to drought or heat or rain or fire will change the price of what I put on my table, but it won't leave me with an empty plate. But those whose land is lost, whose crops are destroyed, may well lose everything. And the food lost to this angry planet will be replaced in our stores by food from other lands. And those other lands may well have less to feed their own. And as extreme weather ratchets up in frequency and intensity, the strain on a global food system, the ache in empty bellies in other lands, *will come home to roost*. In a million ways. Until it reaches my own plate as well.

Our food system (as our entire global economic system) *counts* on exporting precarity to others. But there is only so much precarity that can be absorbed, even by those whose expectations are so much less than our own. And what we will say when they cry, "Enough!" There is a lot more than bad weather headed our way.

So now perhaps you understand why I'm not mincing words. What do I mean by "collapse"? I mean that my unhappy but overwhelming conviction is that we've reached a point where widespread ecological and social collapse is *inevitable*. NO MATTER WHAT *our climate—and our world—is going to buckle*. Extreme weather is going to play havoc with food production is going to drive extreme hunger is going to produce hordes of food refugees, heat refugees, and unimaginable political unrest. Those least responsible for climate chaos will flock to the very countries (like ours) that are the most responsible for collapse, until our own social fabric rips wide open.

The world we've known and presumed would be the backdrop for our future is ... no more. This isn't a matter of nature's vengeance or divine punishment. It's the result of math, physics, and human folly (where "folly" encompasses "innocent" human nature to self-perpetuating human systems that foment evil—and everything in between). Each of these—math, physics, and folly—has a role in collapse. And we've reached a point where ignoring its inevitability, or claiming that's there's still time to avert it, is a betrayal of compassion and wisdom.

In this piece I considered the hard science (math and physics, but also biology and chemistry) end of collapse. Tomorrow I consider the human folly: the psychic-social-cultural roots of our predicament. Let me be clear: this is necessary prelude to Dark Hope, which ends in joy. (To be clear, it may also end in poverty, simplicity, and even ruins—BUT JOY.)

Ten days. Stay with me. Please.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing "public theology" around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, "Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest." *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

Collapse: The Psychic-Social-Cultural Roots: Delivering Dark Hope #3

David R. Weiss – July 28, 2021

This is #3 in an eight-essay series written over ten days in which I'm thinking out loud and a bit on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. I'll develop many of these thoughts further in the future, but I want to set out an overview of sorts. (Here are links to [essay #1](#) and [essay #2](#); while each essay treats a different facet of the larger project, there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.)

In communities of faith—as well as in visionary humanist communities—we tend to hold the conviction that *somehow* ... God, widespread political-personal activism, strategic nonviolence, contagious goodwill, inspired community ... can *still turn things around*. Yet, for the past fifty years almost every reputable “hard science” report has told us, if we hope to live long on this planet we have to start taking better care of it—and soon. Even in recent years, as the reports have grown more and more alarming, most still close with an obligatory paragraph that says, “But there’s still time—if we act soon enough.” There are reasons for this persisting optimism, but the hard science (see [essay #2](#)) is not one of them.

Neither is the soft science. We can document fifty-plus years of doing as little as possible—and oh so begrudgingly. The history of climate policy, corporate priorities, and personal behavior does not inspire hope. Except for exceptions (which prove the rule), no one seems ready to believe that these calls to action apply to them. But what explains our collective inaction that seems all but certain to prove deadly?

Here’s one piece that holds explanatory power.

Death: it’s killing us. It’s more complicated than that—but let me explain. Watching those who stormed the Capitol on January 6 in a frenzy of insurrectional violence I was struck by both their anger and what I took to be their fear. I recalled an image used by Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall in his book, *Lighten Our Darkness* (1976). He likened the (“officially optimistic”) American mindset to children who play with heightened frenzy as they sense that the bell marking the end of recess is about to clang.

The collection of folks gathered at the Capitol—white nationalists, science deniers, QAnon conspirators, and that large swath of (overwhelmingly white) persons who feel economically and politically disenfranchised by forces they don’t understand—what binds them together is their sense (for some of them in explicit pieces of their ideology ... for all of them in ways that intangibly but inescapably impinge on them) that their world is ending. *Recess is almost over*.

And by “recess” I mean the wanton extraction of earth resources and the equally wanton white supremacist exploitation of other humans. Hardly ended, but between climate crisis and other ecological alarms and the immigration crisis, Black Lives Matter and other human rights movements the writing is on the wall: *recess is almost over*. Thus, an apocalyptic anxiety is afoot as regards the world that many of us have taken for granted. But the roots of this anxiety run deeper than we likely realize. And understanding these roots is essential, both to fathom the present moment and also to fashion a path forward.

Reinhold Niebuhr, in the middle of last century, remarked provocatively (in distinct contrast to Genesis 3) that it isn’t sin that causes death, but death that causes of sin. Niebuhr believed that it is our *collective rebellion against finitude—really, against limits of any sort—that drives us to harm others*. And what I saw playing out on January 6 was not simply an insurrection against democratic rule of law (though it was surely that); it was *foremost* the overwrought tantrum of white America at the prospect of finding finitude enforced—*even upon them*.

There is a double truth here: the folks at the Capitol in many ways represent a clear and present threat to the rest of us. Yet in other ways they also represent the tantrum tip of an iceberg that most of America stands on *with them*: the resolute denial of finitude.

That’s as far as my analysis got back in January. Then my April issue of *The Sun* arrived. It included an in-depth interview with Sheldon Solomon, one of the theorists behind Trauma Management Theory (TMT).⁵

⁵ <https://thesunmagazine.org/issues/544/this-mortal-coil>.

TMT is an extraordinarily (and uncomfortably) insightful theory, grounded in Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* (1973). Becker argued, based on his sweeping survey of human history, that because human beings are uniquely (so far as we know) aware of our impending *non-being*—our death—we make enormous psychic and cultural investments in denying death. It seems such an affront to have sufficient self-awareness that we regard ourselves as only a “little less than angels” (Psalm 8:5) ... but then find ourselves thrust into a universe that seems not nearly so impressed with us as we are. *And then we die.*

Haunted by this trauma that no matter what we do we cannot escape death—or its looming leer—Becker viewed this existential fear of death as “the mainspring of all human activity”: our relentless attempt to prove our worth and establish meaning in a universe that just as relentlessly erases us. He suggested that entire cultures, religious beliefs, building projects, and most of our mundane choices are motivated by the persistent awareness that *we will die*, an awareness we seek to submerge beneath every bit of civilization we can build over it.

Denial of Death offers a speculative theory that is as unsettling as it is far-ranging. But is it provable? That's what Solomon has worked to do. Through a series of experiments (track down the article, it's pretty amazing), he's shown how subtle reminders of mortality prompt persons to double-down on their worldviews—suggesting that subconsciously triggering their “death anxiety” leads to a more tenacious embrace and espousal of the worldview they use to “manage” the trauma of death awareness. Even when the tenets of those worldviews can be deadly.

When death anxiety seeps in, persons whose identity is bound up with liberal values become more fervently liberal—it's how they buffer that death awareness. And persons with conservative (or white nationalist or homophobic or xenophobic) values at the heart of their identity become even more so. Tribalism becomes pronounced. In fact, those with worldviews that endorse violence become permissive of violence toward those whose worldviews challenge their own.

Solomon's research explains how the pandemic year unfolded, with fiercely polarized worldviews colliding, and with anti-maskers driven to enact a worldview dismissive of science and the common good: it was their instinctive way of submerging the fear of the very death their actions were courting!

Solomon's book on TMT is titled, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. For the past several decades now, it isn't just our personal (or tribal) mortality that eats away at us. It's the nagging awareness of eco-death: of the crushing finitude of a planet that can no longer support the lengths we go to prove our worth or establish meaning. We. Just. Might. ALL. Die.

Holy shit. That will wake us up for sure. Except—Becker's theory and Solomon's confirming research suggest that what this eco-peril awareness will *actually* do is drive each of us, individually and communally, even more deeply into the worldviews that we've embraced. *Even if those worldviews court the very death we want to deny.* We're not turning back. We're doubling down.

But Solomon has also identified some research-proven ways to “calm” death anxiety and its less life-affirming effects. The regular practice of gratitude and awe. A widening sense of kinship that stirs service to all. And a healthy sense of humility. *There are spiritual paths that cultivate precisely these things.* Solomon's work helps us understand the sobering costs of the human dance with denial. Even more, it affirms ways that churches and other communities can cultivate qualities that allow their members to move into an uncertain future less daunted by death and more moved by compassion.

That, my friends, is the well from which we draw Dark Hope. Seven more days. Stay with me. Please.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

An Abiding, Enduring Vocation: Delivering Dark Hope #4

David R. Weiss – July 29, 2021

This is #4 in an eight-essay series written over ten days in which I'm thinking out loud and a bit on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. I'll develop many of these thoughts further in the future, but I want to set out an overview of sorts. (Here are links to [essay #1](#), [essay #2](#), and [essay #3](#); while each essay treats a different facet of the larger project, there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.)

* * *

After two essays on collapse, it's time for some hope. But not just any hope; *dark* hope.

Why *Dark* Hope? I'm trying to frame a "hope" that is decidedly *not* "upbeat." Because hope in its "upbeat" tone is too close for comfort to foolhardy optimism, which is, in turn, too close for comfort to sheer arrogance, both of which have played a prime role in fostering the collapse that is coming for us. Even more pointedly, though, I say *Dark* Hope because we'll *need* a hope that is *fully alongside us* in the unpredictable tumult ahead. Not a hope that says, "keep your chin up" or "hang in there," but a hope that gasps *with* us: "breathe!" Indeed, not a hope that shines in the darkness, but a hope that abides *as darkness itself*. I'll write a longer piece on this, but that's a start.

But first, a little more on collapse ... because today, July 29, 2021, is World Overshoot Day 2021: the day when, as a global community, we've used as many resources as the planet can generate in a year. In other words, for the remainder of 2021, *we're stealing resources from future generations*. In the late 1970's, when we slipped into overshoot in late December, it was the first time—in the history of forever—that humanity as a whole had outstripped Earth's abundance. Since then, we've rolled that date back by five months. Now we enter overshoot in July.

But July 29, 2021 is *World* Overshoot Day. Not all countries use their share of global resources at the same pace. Here in the United States, we blew by our Country Overshoot Day ... all the way back on March 14. *We'll spend the last 292 days of 2021 draining off the life of future generations*. Did we really think that Mother Nature wouldn't notice?!

This is why ecological and societal collapse is inevitable. Because we have made overshoot into the very infrastructure of our culture. It is the means by which we've come to manage the trauma of our mortality (see essay #3). The rising CO2 levels that drive climate change are "merely" symptomatic of our cultural addiction to an extractive economy now wedded to ecocidal consumption amid psychic denial. But now *collapse is coming*.

Which is why we must turn swiftly to "Deliver Dark Hope" for the days to come.

Honestly, in the worst-case scenario (and there are more persons than you might guess who foresee a worst-case scenario), the cascading effects of climate change and loss of biodiversity integrity (basically rupturing ecosystem after ecosystem) will be so severe that humanity *as a species* will not survive the next 100 years. That's a worst-case scenario, but it is NOT an inconceivable one. Were it to come to pass, *the last human being to ever live might already have been born*. Worst-case scenario, but conceivable. Sit with that awareness for a few days.

Personally, I still think a best-case scenario is possible: one where over the next 20-40 years we experience a series of jarring lurches backward in development as agricultural, political, electrical, civic, medical systems and more are upended by a world running on overshoot far too much and far too long. Any projection of a smooth, technologically guided draw-down strikes me as dangerously naïve.

Mathematically, the Minnesota Twins (currently 17 games out of first place, with a record of 43-60) *could* still come back to win their division. But only a fool would bet money today on their World Series chances this year. And only an addict would bet the life savings of their entire family on that prospect.

Right now *our entire culture is drenched in addictive consumption*—this is true to varying degrees across almost every demographic. Which is why even the level-headed climate pundits preferred by the mainstream media are able to keep telling us, "It's bad, but there's still a chance to make this all right." My brother, who died after a decades long battle with alcoholism, believed right up until his last drink, that there was still a chance to make this all right. I'm telling you, that type of talk simply encourages addicts of all stripes—including lots of folks of good

will—to bet the entire welfare of the next generation on the tiniest mathematical possibility (one that nothing in all history says is possible): “we can still make it all right.”

Collapse is coming. And it will be chaotic, brutal, deadly, and apocalyptic in ways we’ll wish happened only on the movie screen . . . or in the Bible. Still, in a best-case scenario—*the one with multiple jarring backward lurches*—if we brace for collapse and if we prepare ourselves and one another to endure, we *may* persevere. Which brings me to Dark Hope.

In 1939, Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation to come to Union Seminary in New York. Already fiercely critical of (and targeted by) Hitler and the Nazi regime, the invitation offered him safety on the eve of the Second World War. But soon after arriving he changed his mind—despite strong pressure from many friends to remain here. He explained that he needed to return to *be with* the German people in order to be worthy to participate in rebuilding their life after the war. Bonhoeffer’s conviction became clear and unwavering: he was called to be with his people in the midst of tumult. His vocation was to embody Emmanuel—“God-with-us”—for his community.

Today, for the church to deliver Dark Hope—to bear good news in the very belly of the beast that is collapse—we must be equally clear and unwavering. We dare not hold on to the safety of “calm” until it is too late to bear witness at all. Like Bonhoeffer, our calling is to be God’s presence in the midst of God’s people . . . in the midst of collapse. That begins by having the conviction to be public in acknowledging that collapse is coming. Avoiding it is no longer possible. Hoping otherwise is no longer justified. And waiting even a little longer to see what comes our way *risks choosing timid caution in a moment that requires daring faithfulness*.

That moment is now. If we are to have a harvest of Dark Hope ready for when our people need it, we must begin planting those seeds today.

There is still more to say about Dark Hope, and I will say it briefly in the days ahead . . . and at length in the months and years to come. If you’ve come with me this far, *thank you*. Here’s where we have yet to go.

Sunday: My assertion that Dark Hope admits the impending reality of collapse is NOT a cry of resignation. It is a call to action oriented toward the truth. There remains quintessential, even *existential* value to justice work. This is true even *and especially* in a world that’s unraveling. Stopping pipelines, honoring Black Lives, abolishing prisons—this work becomes all the more imperative in a world misshapen by climate breakdown.

Monday: The shape of Christian faith (actually of *human* faith) in this time of Dark Hope will be steeped in lament-compassion. But there are other key virtues to be cultivated as well, such as the gratitude, awe, widened kinship, mutual service, and healthy humility mentioned yesterday. This is a twin summons that involves both reclaiming core features of our distant heritage and imagining new ways to cultivate and practice them in a wholly changed world.

Tuesday: This will be the most difficult piece for me to write (and the one I am least prepared for). I will offer some first thoughts on how Dark Hope honors our children and grandchildren as the blessing they are, within the *agonizing* recognition that their inheritance from us . . . will be collapse. How then will we love these lives that have already been consigned to such jeopardy? I don’t yet know, *but I will learn*.

Wednesday: This much I *do* know, even though I cannot say how: Dark Hope brings with it joy. There is much that we will not fathom in advance—we will only understand in the doing, but I believe compassion is the alchemy of human existence. It is the seed of the sacred in our lives. And its fruit is joy.

And now, a short break from these essays to prepare a sermon. I’ll be “back” on Sunday. I hope you are, too.

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What of Justice? – Delivering Dark Hope #5

David R. Weiss – August 2, 2021

This is #5 in an 8-essay series in which I'm thinking out loud and a bit on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. I'll develop many of these thoughts further in the future, but I want to set out an overview of sorts. (Here are links to [essay #1](#), [essay #2](#), [essay #3](#), and [essay #4](#). While each essay treats a different facet of the larger project, there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.)

* * *

Given my position that ecological and societal collapse is now inevitable, does that mean that nothing else—not even climate activism—matters anymore, and that we should all simply “brace for impact”?

No. And No.

Yes, we should “brace for impact.” But climate activism still matters—*as does every other social justice cause*. In fact, precisely at this precarious juncture, as we slide toward potentially precipitous collapse, about the worst thing we can do is ignore everything else. (The *worst* thing we can do is pretend everything will be fine.)

I regard collapse—massively disruptive collapse on both ecological and societal levels—as inevitable by the end of this century, and likely much, much sooner. This is *not negotiable*. We're on the very cusp of “game over” for the apex of humanity in its techno-racist-extractive-capitalist expression.

(Whether we get the chance to refashion ourselves in a different human expression remains to be seen. Clearly, there *are* other possible forms of human community. Unfortunately, this form—and with the enthusiastic consent of Constantinian Christianity—has become cancerous ... and has metastasized across continents and cultures. This present form of pathological human “community” is driving collapse in a way that will impact and undo every human community everywhere on the planet.)

What remains negotiable is just *how* catastrophic, brutal, and dehumanizing collapse gets as it plays out. But we're *not* negotiating from a position of strength. We've wreaked havoc on nearly every biophysical Earth system that supports our well-being. Worse, we've established whole human-built systems that now functionally compel our individual participation in further undoing the planet regardless of our own intentions. (“Individual responsibility,” while critical for our own integrity, is largely impotent at slowing the damage done by large-scale destructive systems.) Nonetheless, every system of injustice we can challenge lessens the evil that collapse will usher into our world.

Consider Enbridge's Line 3 project in northern Minnesota. It serves one purpose only within the Earth System: to facilitate (and accelerate!) the incineration of tar sands oil into the atmosphere. Some say it will “power” the economy and provide jobs. But “it's NOT the economy, stupid.” It's the land, water, air, heat, animals, plants, and the people. Given the scientific awareness we have, *Line 3's ongoing construction is an act of willful ecocide carried out by persons, companies, governments addicted to a way of life that deals in death*. Stopping Line 3 matters, not because doing so will prevent collapse, but because doing so will lessen the severity of collapse. *It will save lives. Climate activism is quintessential and existential work in a collapsing world*.

But ... the same is true of every other social justice issue. To name only a few examples:

Nuclear storage. As electrical grids become less reliable around the clock, nuclear waste storage facilities represent the very gates of hell, with radioactive waste just waiting for our grid to drop its guard. There is no longer arc of injustice nor reach of evil than that we have forced future generations to protect themselves from our lust for energy. *Anti-nuclear work is quintessential and existential in a collapsing world*.

Immigration justice. The history of undocumented immigrants *is* the history of unjust foreign policies used to enrich our nation by mal-developing other nations' economies, agricultural policies, and societies. Climate breakdown—driven largely by the exorbitant energy use of over-developed countries—is creating additional human and ecological crises in other nations, which *will* drive *waves* of climate refugees across our borders. *Immigration justice, redressing both past injustices as well as the unfolding climate reality, is quintessential and existential work in a collapsing world*.

Racial Justice. Black lives have been historically—unremittingly—subjected to socio-physical violence (of which the police/prison industrial complex is only the most visible manifestation). This is *inseparable* from a culture and economy that “live” by extraction and exploitation. Our ability to navigate collapse with our

humanity intact rests on our readiness to affirm how *deeply* Black Lives Matter and our willingness to abolish the systems created to control them. *Racial justice work is quintessential and existential in a collapsing world.*

Indigenous Rights. Our genocidal treatment of Native Americans foreshadowed our ecocidal treatment of the land to which they knew themselves to be intimately related. There is *no* path toward a life-affirming relationship with the land on which we dwell without repairing the deeply broken relationship we have brokered with the land's indigenous peoples. *This work is quintessential and existential in a collapsing world.*

Gender and Sexual Justice. The biases we carry toward gender or sexual expression reflect a mistrust of the mysterious forces at play in our own embodiment that in turn drives an unwise impulse to control and/or condemn those same forces when they manifest differently in other lives. This dynamic of being so ill at ease in natural bodies is interwoven with our assumption that nature itself needs our control and/or merits our contempt. *Gender and Sexual Justice is quintessential and existential work in a collapsing world.*

Gun reform. As our politics becomes more polarized and our societal fabric becomes more frayed, and climate change stresses our personal and communal lives *far more disruptively* than Covid did, does anyone think more guns will be a providential addition to this equation? Like the climate crisis, *this problem has been deliberately created.* Successive generations of politicians *chose to ignore it* until it's now truly frightening to address. We must somehow reign in the actual proliferation of guns and our societal fetish that equates power with the capacity to kill. *Gun reform is quintessential and existential work in a collapsing world.*

Voting Rights. Electoral politics has shown itself more amenable to corruption than to collaboration in seeking real justice, but this makes the struggle to protect and extend voting rights all the more critical. Given the rise of Republican neo-fascist white-nationalist misogynist extremism, there can be no doubt that where they gain control of legislatures at the state or federal level they *will* undercut efforts to avoid climate catastrophe. (See [essay #3](#).) *Voting Rights work is quintessential and existential in a collapsing world.*

I could go on. None of these issues—or countless others—can afford to wait until after the climate crisis has been successfully met. First, because the climate crisis has not and will not be “successfully met”; it's “game over” on that count. Second, because the *only way* the collapse crisis *might* be successfully met (where “success” means unprecedented disruption and tumult instead of the catastrophic erasure of humanity), is if we work vigorously on all these fronts *simultaneously*.

Daunting doesn't begin to capture the scope. It's true, nearly all of us inherited some portion of the crises before us from earlier generations, even as we've entangled our own lives with them over the years. It's also true, those holding the greatest wealth and power in almost every case hold the greatest culpability. But in a crisis, *none of that really matters.* What matters is responding in the present moment, and the quickest impulse, as the immensity of our situation becomes clear, is paralysis.

I believe one of the graces of Dark Hope is the invitation to follow our deepest passion in our response. We need not ... ought not ... *cannot* attempt to do everything. Attending to vocation, finding that sweet spot where our deep passion meets the world's deep need—and trusting that others are doing the same—preserves our focus, and focuses our energy, when everything is clamoring for it all at once. I don't pretend this is easy. It requires passions that are shaped by care for the world. And communities that shape such passions. Not easy. But possible. Necessary. Dark Hope. More tomorrow.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

Faith Fit for Collapse – Delivering Dark Hope #6

David R. Weiss – August 3, 2021

This is #6 in an 8-essay series in which I'm thinking out loud and a bit on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. I'll develop many of these thoughts further in the future, but I want to set out an overview of sorts. (Here are links to [essay #1](#), [essay #2](#), [essay #3](#), [essay #4](#), and [essay #5](#). While each essay treats a different facet of the larger project, there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.)

* * *

In this essay I want to introduce some of the themes I think can guide churches in fostering a “faith fit for collapse.” That sounds underwhelming. As in, “Really? ‘Fit for collapse’? That’s all you got for us?!” Fair enough. But trust me, when collapse hits—and hits hard—*this* is the faith you want. This is incarnational faith absent the Hallelujah chorus, unassuming, cobbled together, stumbling in the dark, but stubbornly incarnational nonetheless.

We begin with a couple necessary asides.

One. I align myself with the faith community that draws its life out of the story of Jesus and the vision of justice-mercy-compassion-grace that forms the grand arc of God’s liberating love in the Bible. But I do NOT regard Christianity (or the Bible) as having a monopoly on sacred wisdom. I believe most long-standing religious and philosophical traditions harbor genuine truths in their teachings and practices. And no single tradition has it all “right.” I do my thinking alongside and with the church—specifically the progressive edge of the Christian tradition—because this is where I make my spiritual home, and this is the collection of language and imagery I know best. Because as yet this community has little inkling of what it can—and must—do to bear good news to a world in collapse. And because awakening this community is my vocation: that place where my deep passion and joy meet the world’s deep hunger and need.

Two. This is Christian faith ... on edge. I’d argue that authentic Christian faith has *always and everywhere* been “on edge.” Placing compassion—active empathy-solidarity with the suffering—as a core Christian virtue, means that anytime the church is anywhere *other* than alongside those who suffer, seeking to undo the causes of their suffering and working to promote their ability to flourish, it’s being something *other* than the church. Usually that’s been as chaplain to empire (or culture or economy ... or whiteness). Occasionally, as Inquisitor, by many different names. The Christian faith I suggest here moves *against* that current and is decidedly, unreservedly ... on edge. It may seem vaguely familiar but uncomfortably disconcerting. Yet with all my heart and all my mind, I believe it is the path that beckons to those who follow Jesus. I’m sure my understanding will deepen as I write (and live!) my way into it. But I am convinced the path begins here. Now. So let’s.

Features of a Faith Fit for Collapse. These are just some of my intuitions. The challenge for the church is to reclaim ancient ideas and/or practices that cultivate features like these—or to create fresh ideas and practices to do so. None of them are uniquely Christian, but they will have a *distinctively* Christian expression in the context of our story and life.

Gratitude and awe. Obviously, there are deep roots for this in the biblical tradition, but Joanna Macy sets it as the foundation for her “Work that Reconnects.” She regards it not simply as a praiseworthy disposition; in our present context it’s *the* essential anchor for our work. Cultivating and then embodying practices that instill and strengthen gratitude and awe is a life-or-death proposition in a time of collapse.

Grief and lament. This is about honesty, but it goes further. It begins with confessing, recognizing, and feeling in our gut the anguish of all the horror we have wrought on the natural world, the many ways we’ve *uncreated* creation. Part of this is accountability. Adulthood involves honest self-appraisal. But the deeper, near mystical part of this, is that ONLY authentic grief and lament before the suffering of the world can open a doorway forward. ONLY this. *We are at a DEAD END until we grieve.* And the sides are closing in. Fast. Holding onto gratitude and awe for dear life, we must fashion ways that open us to grief that has every right to swallow us whole. But it won’t.

Empathy-Solidarity. What we will discover, bathed in grief that is honest and overwhelming, is that we are IN FACT (not as warm fuzzy feeling, but IN FACT!) *kin to all creation.* Our capacity for grief is the echo

of our original kinship, often recounted in myths and more recently confirmed by science. Interwoven and entangled are not nice metaphors. They are gritty descriptions for the blessed mystical-ecological messiness of nature. And this empathy-solidarity, rooted in the original fabric of the cosmos can tie us back into the energy of the universe: Love. But ONLY on the far side of grief, ONLY as empathy with ALL creation. Any attempt to “cheat” here, to be anything less than “all in,” will cost us everything. The church has become very good at making modest demands on its people. Today the God who created and loves the world we have so despoiled asks *everything* of us. It is time for the church to be a partner in that ask.

Compassion as Mutual Vulnerability. We idolize security. Insofar as “death is the cause of sin” (see [essay #3](#)), our desire for security in the face of finitude is among the most deeply ingrained self-defeating impulse we carry. The truth of *this* life is that we all die, and we’re all bound together, one living messy mass from tiny microbes to brilliant minds: one. Until death comes for us. Compassion is not a virtue by which the secure offer aid to the insecure; it is the revolutionary solidarity by which we own the truth that we are all vulnerable, and our best “protection” is to be vulnerable together. This means *embracing the goodness of finitude*, which will be a challenge for the church. This is a MUCH bigger project than a paragraph, but somehow, if we want to keep “heaven” as part of our faith, we must use it to bolster our commitment to the preciousness of *this* life (in which we die), lived in mutual vulnerability ... and joy. For whatever years we have, *here ... is home*.

The Liminal is Holy. But only if we make it so. We have learned (for example, in hospice) to accompany both patients and families as they hover (liminally—on the threshold) between worlds. We will dwell for years in the discomfort of a great inbetweenness. It may unleash chaos and terror. But if we learn how to hover within the liminal *while holding one another close* we can render it holy, pregnant with opportunity, even in the midst of collapse.

There is more to say. And other days to say it. The features named above (and more) will need to find expression in our theology and practice, prayers and hymnody, sacraments and social gatherings. Our faith-formation (for all ages) will involve developing the character that supports these features and sharing the skills that allow us to embody them. In every facet of our being church we must learn to manifest God’s liberatory love for creation. Not because such love can forestall collapse, but because it can *endure* collapse. That’s where we are. That’s what we need. God help us if we turn away.

But we’re *not* here alone. Besides countless persons in my own faith tradition, I’ve encountered “clarifying echoes” from outside it. These help me re-true my own inheritance, or recover pearls of great worth that have been neglected over the years. Joanna Macy’s Active Hope and The Work that Reconnects—steeped in her own experience of Buddhist teachings and systems theory—have been revelatory and have confirmed my own intuitions. Robin Wall Kimmerer’s writings on Indigenous wisdom have been a treasure. And my readings in the Transition Town Movement, Permaculture, and Deep Adaptation have offered profound moments of common recognition. What I write on the page continues an unending conversation in my heart and mind ... and with you.

Finally, in my last piece I admitted, “daunting” seems too small a word for what we face. But I also said it’s *possible* to imagine communities that might cultivate passions and joys that center our energy on tending the world. “Salvation” shares the same root as “salve,” a healing ointment. Rather than thinking we can save the world, perhaps it is enough help that we might *salve* the world: tend its wounds, and our own, as best we can. Perhaps that is the sacred wisdom we need most today.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

Children ... of Collapse – Delivering Dark Hope #7

David R. Weiss – August 3, 2021

NOTE: None of my writing is behind a pay wall. It's all gift. Over the next decade it may be among the most important gifts you receive. Still, this is my work. Every monthly pledge (even \$2-10/month!) via Patreon keeps me fed in body and spirit. If you can support me with a monthly gift I'm grateful. In any case, please read—and please subscribe.

This is #7 in an 8-essay series in which I'm thinking out loud and a bit on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. I'll develop many of these thoughts further in the future, but I want to set out an overview of sorts. (Here are links to [essay #1](#), [essay #2](#), [essay #3](#), [essay #4](#), [essay #5](#), and [essay #6](#). Each essay treats a different facet of the larger project, but there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.)

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This will be a short essay. I'm not able to write it yet.

In an [earlier post](#) I named each of my six children and nine grandchildren by name. All of them are children of collapse. In some ways I am, too. Earth scientists estimate that we left the Holocene Epoch sometime shortly before I was born in 1959. That geologic time period had lasted 12,000 years, offering sufficient climate stability (and other conditions) so that human civilization could emerge ... and flourish.

But sometime after the Second World War, likely as part of the post-war boom, we entered what is often now called the Anthropocene Epoch, so named because in the chapter of Earth history, human activity became a critical factor in unsettling 12,000 years of stability. (The term itself was coined in 2000; scientists later projected backward that it effectively began sometime between 1945 and 1960.)

It is the Anthropocene that will be our undoing.

More truly put, it is the Anthropocene that *has been* our undoing. In its 70ish short years the Anthropocene has already irrevocably unmoored multiple planetary systems from their hospitable-to-humanity demarcations. This is hard for us to fathom. Isn't there *always* time to “learn our lesson” and pull back from the edge? Or, if not *always*, isn't there STILL time to do that today? On my reading the answer is No. We've passed the point beyond which even the goodwill of most of us will not undo the folly of a few. Or the debt incurred to those multiple planetary systems these past seven decades.

Those systems *will* balance out again. But that new normal will be so far removed from the Holocene that tales of the twentieth century will read like fairy tales by the end of the twenty-first century. Distant memories of a different world, without ever having left this planet. Ironically—tragically!—having christened this new epoch after ourselves (*Anthropos*: Humanity) and the impact of global industrial human civilization, it will almost surely become the epoch that upends and perhaps even erases that same civilization within the next century.

Which is why naming my children and grandchildren is an exercise of immeasurable grief.

It is not *only* that. Even someone facing a terminal diagnosis still laughs. Still takes joy in spending time with family and friends. Still treasures countless small moments. Human beings are unimaginably resilient. So while grief gets its share of stage time, it does not get the last word every night.



Our family – Summer 2017

But a terminal diagnosis for the world-as-we-know-it? That is some *deep* grief. Probably no one reading these words bears much blame at all in the coming collapse. Our lives, our culture, our values have made us complicit in it. But apart from doing what we can to disentangle ourselves from destructive personal

values and to transform destructive systems to make collapse less deadly (and this is *really important* work to do!), I don't think there's any real value in beating ourselves up.

I believe that as we form communities (church, neighborhood, friends) that can work to shape the character and faith that can serve us in the years ahead—as we do this—we will learn to claim our children as the blessing they are, even against the backdrop of collapse. We will find rich purpose in teaching them to love a world so deeply wounded that *all their lives* will be necessarily given over to its care. We will learn how to do this not simply because we owe it to them, but because we love them. And that love will refuse to allow grief the last word every night.

But tonight, I grieve.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

Collapsing into ... Joy – Delivering Dark Hope #8

David R. Weiss – August 5, 2021

This is #8 in an 8-essay series in which I've been thinking out loud and on the run about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. I'll develop many of these thoughts further in the future; this is just an overview of sorts. (Here are links to [essay #1](#), [essay #2](#), [essay #3](#), [essay #4](#), [essay #5](#), [essay #6](#), and [essay #7](#). Each treats a different facet of the larger project, but there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.)

* * *

Dark Hope: a hope that is *fully alongside us* in the unpredictable tumult ahead. Indeed, not a hope that “shines in the darkness,” but a hope that abides *as darkness itself*.

Margaret is my faithful editor. She is also my beloved spouse, dearest friend, life companion, playmate, and more. But she is not least the first pair of eyes to read most of my words (and catch most of my typos) before I hit “publish.”

Last night was no exception. When I finished “Children ... of Collapse,” I gave it to her to read. These are *our* six children (we conceived none of them together, but we hold them all together in our hearts) and *our* nine grandchildren. Usually she will mark the mistakes, and often add comments in the margin (Wow! Yes! Powerful! Or longer remarks). I sometimes hear her audibly sigh in sync with those marginal notations.

Last night she read in silence. Then, without saying a word, she came and held me, and we hugged one another at the terrible truth I had written. There was no joy. More a breathless sense of awe at the words that occasionally move through me on their way into the world. And an awful sense of foreboding at the words themselves.

Per the rhythm of our life, Margaret headed to bed a couple hours before me. While she slept I sat on the floor at the foot of the bed and wrote a love note for her to find in the morning:

This reading, listening, thinking, and writing that I'm doing these days takes a toll on me. Amid the 'euphoria' of words well-crafted ... is the weight they bear. *I would be lost without you*. It's been 40 years since I read *Camp Concentration* (Thomas Disch, 1968). I only vaguely recall the plot—but the closing lines are still vivid. All the more so these days: 'Much that is terrible we do not know. Much that is beautiful we shall yet discover. Let's sail together till we come to the edge.' Margaret, how much I love you! ~David

Ten days ago I began these essays ... on a whim. Of sorts. The sort of whim that appears in the Christian feminist phrase “God's fierce whimsy.” A colleague posted a challenge: to imagine what change, transformation, gestation can occur in ten days. All these thoughts—nearly 11,000 words now!—have been brooding in my heart-mind for months. Then this sister in the holy work of justice-making sort of dared me—on a whim—to open that door for ten days and invite these words to come forth. *A holy whim then*.

Do you *thank* someone for that? I'm not sure she had any idea what this challenge would ask of me. I'm not sure I did either. I sensed the simmering inside, the clawing in my mind, the twisting in my heart, the screeching in my gut. I sensed these things enough to know I was not eager to open the door. Now the door is not just open, it's off its hinges—in splinters, I fear. Thanks ... I guess.

Anyway, I promised Joy on this last day. Here's what I got.

Praxis names the intentional communal circle of doing-reflecting-doing-reflecting-doing. In base Christian communities (lay-centered small groups focused on study-discussion-practice of core biblical themes, first seen in Latin America in the late 1960s) *praxis* helped birth liberation theology, leading ordinary Christian peasants to do-reflect-do-reflect-do the Bible as they read it together.

Dark Hope will be like that. *Exactly*. We'll do-reflect-do-reflect-do (where “doing” means the sort of things I noted in my “Faith Fit for Collapse” piece: gratitude, awe, lament, empathy, compassion, and liminality. And *that* doing—perhaps not immediately, but soon (which is to say, *soon enough*)—will birth Joy.

King said, “The time is always right to do good.” We like to believe we have all the time in the world. And that when we get around to it, we *will* do right by the climate. But I say *there is no time left to avert collapse*. None. King replies even louder, “*The time is always right to do good.*” We’re not arguing; it’s a call-and-response. *We’re both right.*

I imagine collapse will arrive as Jesus put it, “like a thief in the night.” We won’t be “ready.” Ever. Unless we’re *doing right*. So, I say, don’t fret over much about collapse. Be attentive, yes. *But be in your life as fully as you can.* And fill that life with choices worthy of Joy.

Which is *not* the same as the selfish pursuit of wealth or stuff or power or cheap fun. Joy is that which affirms life and value to all that is, even if it is quirkily so just for you. If you teach or cook or heal or build or manage or nurse or write or whatever you do, do it with as much heart as you can. Because anything that builds up the whole of humanity now is of priceless worth. And whatever brings you happiness, so long as it doesn’t come at the expense of another’s suffering, savor that happiness. We don’t have all the time in the world. All the time we have left in the world ... is NOW. So live.

I think of the gospel writer John and his interesting notion of eternal life. Scholars call it “realized eschatology”; it’s a fancy way of saying that John pulls the “last things” (*eschatoi*) into this present moment (it’s “realized” right now). He is 100% convinced—he doesn’t “argue” this, he *announces* it: *eternal life begins now*. I don’t know whether John had a vibrant notion of heaven (most Jews don’t, and John was a deeply Jewish gospel writer), but it’s clear that he had a profoundly vibrant notion of *life in the wake of Jesus*. It was life that ran infinitely deep, fearlessly so, and life that had no need to wait for death in order to become eternal. To fill the NOW brimful and more.

John is also the gospel writer who gives us a cosmic Christology. Seemingly disinterested in shepherds or Magi, angels or stars, he says, “In the beginning was the Word.” And “all things came into being through this Word.” John audaciously suggests that in Jesus’ life we behold an incarnate echo of the Big Bang. John calls that echo Love. And Jesus commends it to us as his signature deed. “By this people will know you are my followers: that you love one another.”

We could use a little realized eschatology today. Love fiercely and fully and widely and deeply. And you will know the taste of eternal life: Joy.

That Joy may feel a little thin right now. Because, likely as much for you as for me, this news of collapse is a bit of an emotional shit show when it first hits you. But *praxis*. Do-reflect-do-reflect-do some more. It is the mundane—done with deep intention, done together, done with love—that, by the same sacred alchemy that powered the original Big Bang, is yet able to make miracles. To bring Joy.

We’re heading into some pretty severe turbulence. And time is short. So, stitch together, with others around you, a whole bunch of gratitude, lament, empathy, compassion, and liminality. Do so with love. And I promise, no matter what comes our way, Julian of Norwich’s words *will* ring true: “*All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.*” That’s Joy.

One of my former Hamline students (Annika Rutenbeck, 2004) wrote in a journal entry I’ve always remembered: *God is at the mercy of our good doings*. That’s holy wisdom. As our ecosystem collapses and our social fabric frays ... and tears, we *will* wonder, “Where is God in all of this?!” And I think Annika has it just right: *in our good doings*. God is there. And so is Joy.

Be there, too.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

The Latest IPCC and the Imperative of Delivering Dark Hope

David R. Weiss – August 9, 2021

Dark Hope: a hope that is *fully alongside us* in the unpredictable tumult ahead. Indeed, not a hope that “shines in the darkness,” but a hope that abides *as darkness itself*.

The latest IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change) just out today does everything but connect the dots: **ecological and societal collapse IS coming and we are NOT ready**. These are the five “key takeaways” identified by CNN, captured here in DIRECT quotes from the CNN story:

(1) Humans are unequivocally warming the planet. Society’s reliance on fossil fuels is the reason the planet has already warmed 1.2 degrees Celsius—every bit of it through the emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane.

(2) The only way to stop the warming is to end greenhouse gas emissions: The longer it takes, the hotter it gets. Avoiding 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming is all but impossible ... avoiding the worsening impacts that come from approaching and passing 2 degrees of warming will take significant cuts to greenhouse gas emissions starting immediately. If emissions continue to increase, the world will top 2 degrees Celsius of warming—possibly before 2050—and reach 3 degrees Celsius before the end of the century.

(3) Climate impacts (heat waves, droughts, flooding, hurricanes, sea level rise, weather whiplash) are severe in every region of the planet, and will worsen with every fraction of a degree of warming.

(4) Some changes are irreversible, even under the lowest emissions scenarios. Ice sheets will continue melting for hundreds to thousands of years, which will cause sea levels to rise well beyond 2100 and stay higher for millennia.

(5) Atmospheric methane is skyrocketing and is currently the highest it’s been in 800,000 years, largely because of a combination of natural gas leaks (around drilling sites) and unsustainable agriculture and cattle farming.

As usual, the report wants to say two things at once: the situation is dire AND there is still time if we start now. **But the undeniable truth is that we are NOT starting now. We are politically and culturally incapable of starting now.** As one tiny but immediate example of that, on a Chicago news station today I listened to a news story summarizing this latest IPCC report, then *immediately* as the station cut away for commercial, the newscaster said, “When we return, get ready to crank up your AC as we hear about the heat coming our way next week.”

This is why even holding temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius is barely imaginable. We are headed toward ecological and societal collapse the likes of which we cannot fathom. It *may* be survivable, but **we are completely unprepared to meet the challenges that are already inexorably racing at us.**

Over the past two weeks I wrote an eight-essay series about what it means to be church (or *any* authentic human community) ... in a time of approaching ecological-social collapse. This is only the beginning of the next chapter of my work. If you missed that series, **I implore you to read it start to finish.** (Links are below.) It is still a bit rough and raw: I wrote it “on the run” day by day. I will be refining and expanding on every paragraph in the months and years ahead. But these essays make an essential beginning—and *we are already far too late in our beginning.*

This is an annotated overview of the essays, with links to each one. Each essay treats a different facet of the larger project, but there *is* a narrative arc to them. I encourage you to read them in order when possible.

Delivering Dark Hope #1: [It's a Dickens of a Time to be the Church](#). In which I announce the overarching project I plan to undertake, along with my conviction that in *this* moment for the church to be the church means to “deliver dark hope.”

Delivering Dark Hope #2: [Collapse – the Bio-Physical Roots](#). In which I set forth the damning “hard science” evidence for why eco-social collapse is now a foregone conclusion. This essay is far from exhaustive—and was written prior to today’s IPCC report—but, sadly, it is not difficult to make the case we have passed the point of no return.

Delivering Dark Hope #3: [Collapse – The Psychic-Social-Cultural Roots](#). In which I draw on Trauma Management Theory (grounded in Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death*, 1973), to set forth the equally damning “soft science” evidence for why eco-social collapse is now a foregone conclusion.

Delivering Dark Hope #4: [An Abiding, Enduring Vocation](#). In which I argue that the moment has arrived for the church to make an unwavering declaration of collapse (there is no more time for cautious words if we intend to be church) and make an equally unwavering commitment to be *with* God’s people as we are pulled into the midst of collapse.

Delivering Dark Hope #5: [What of Justice?](#) In which I explain why, even as climate breakdown becomes an all-encompassing reality, that reality *encompasses* justice work; it doesn’t supersede it. There remains quintessential, even *existential* value to justice work, even *and especially* in an unraveling world.

Delivering Dark Hope #6: [Faith Fit for Collapse](#). In which I suggest some of the key features of “faith fit for collapse,” such as the gratitude-awe, grief-lament, empathy-solidarity, mutual vulnerability, and the holiness of liminality. This involves both reclaiming core features of our distant heritage and imagining new ways to cultivate and practice them in a wholly changed world.

Delivering Dark Hope #7: [Children ... of Collapse](#). In which I (try to) address head on the awkward *agonizing* dilemma of acknowledging that we *will* bequeath to our children a world so deeply wounded that *all their lives* will be necessarily given over to its care. How then will we love these lives that have already been consigned to such jeopardy? I don’t yet know, *but I will learn*.

Delivering Dark Hope #8: [Collapsing into ... Joy](#). In which I assert that, even as we careen toward eco-social collapse, and even though we rightly feel frantic and frenzy, *nonetheless* it remains possible to live our lives well and with purpose even now. There is much that we will not fathom in advance—that we will only understand in the doing—but somehow Dark Hope brings with it joy.

I do not claim these essays are definitive. They were penned on the run. They mark only the beginning of my own plunge into writing theology in the very midst of collapse. But I pledge to keep writing, to bear witness to the Gospel as our world unravels. And to imagine as fiercely and faithfully as I can what it means to be human in the years ahead.

I do not believe you will find a more thoughtful guide or a more worthy conversation partner on this journey. I hope you join me. (Please subscribe!) Dark Hope awaits. And we have no time to lose.

* * *

NOTE: None of my writing is behind a pay wall. It's all gift. Over the next decade it may be among the most important gifts you receive. Still, this is my work. Every monthly pledge (even \$2-10/month!) via [Patreon](#) keeps me fed in body and spirit. If you can support me with a monthly gift I'm grateful. In any case, please read—and please subscribe.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*

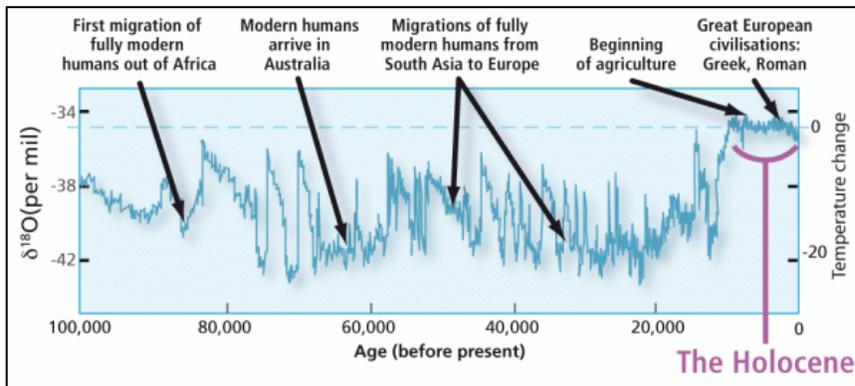
Welcome to the Otharktocene [Ōth-ARKT-ō-cene] (a sort of afterword ...)

David R. Weiss – August 24, 2021

Most of us didn't even notice the "Now Leaving the Holocene" sign as we flew past it, but earth scientists generally agree that we did, in fact, exit that epoch around 1950 or so. It's understandable we missed it; after all, we weren't looking for an exit lane. For some 11,700 years (more or less) we cruised along in a geologic period where the various bio-chemical-physical forces that give Earth its "personality" provided a remarkably stable planetary system—in our case a planetary demeanor conducive to the birth of human civilization.

Indeed, Earth system scientists first noticed our departure—belatedly, with the Holocene already 50 years in the rearview mirror. These scientists use systems theory as a framework to understand how all the various features of our planet fit together—and function. In short, systems theory asserts (or observes) that everything is *dynamically* connected to everything else and, therefore, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The whole, in fact, *emerges* as the parts interact. (The Buddhist notion of "interbeing" and the African concept of *ubuntu* make similar assertions about human beings, suggesting that each one of us exists—*emerges*—at the nexus of a host of relationships.)

For Earth system scientists, the life-giving and civilization-supporting conditions of the Holocene Epoch are the emergent whole shaped by elemental planetary processes that act in concert—a "living system," as it were—to establish the playing field for life on this small blue planet. Dynamic, interactive, and largely self-



regulating, for the last twelve millennia these processes have maintained a planet worth calling home: Earth.

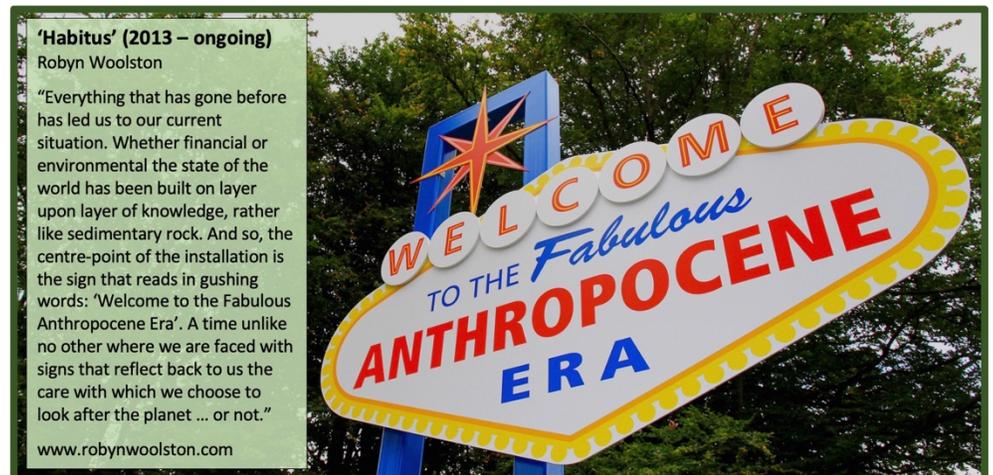
While homo sapiens first appeared some 200,000 years ago, it was only during the Holocene epoch, beginning around 10,000 BCE, that humanity began to flourish. Seasons stabilized, and across those seasons—for nearly 12,000 years—average global

surface temperatures never varied, plus or minus, by more than a single degree Celsius. The Holocene provided a climate for agriculture to emerge ... followed by cities and civilization.

We owe our life as we know it to the Holocene. Thus, Earth system scientists have been eager to fathom the forces and processes within the Earth system that allowed the Holocene to happen and, perhaps more importantly, that have allowed it to persist. We know of no other planetary condition under which human life can thrive as it has during the Holocene.

None. It was, therefore, a moment of exasperated and unsettling insight when, during a February 2000 meeting of international scientists to discuss the overall "health" of the Earth System, one of them exclaimed, "We are no longer in the Holocene; we are in the ... *Anthropocene*."

That word Anthropocene (literally the "new" epoch "of the human/*anthropos*")



was coined in the heat of the moment (pun intended), to denote that the Earth System was being impacted by a new planetary force: *human activity*. The name is both entirely accurate and woefully misleading.

It's accurate that at some point in our relatively recent past (often dated paradoxically from either the dropping of the atomic bomb or the post-war industrial boom—in either case, around 1950), human activity reached a new pitch and a new zenith, often labeled the Great Acceleration. *We became a planetary force in its own right*. (BIG CLARIFICATION: that “we” is collective human activity definitively shaped and driven by a mostly white, Western, male-centric world. That's hardly a nod to ingenuity; more likely evidence of guilt for ecocide.) The tumblers had been lining up slowly over millennia, aided by patriarchy, religion, and science. Finally, with the age of empire/exploitation followed by industrial capitalism, consumer capitalism, nuclear militarism, and economic globalization, we humans “earned” a seat at a prized table.

Think of it. If the very bounds of the Holocene were marked out by the interaction of climate, the ozone layer, the genetic richness of the biosphere, the great biogeochemical cycles of nitrogen and phosphorous, the freshwater cycle, the ocean system, and shifting patterns of land use—suddenly we had a spot at THAT table. If you ever wondered what it would be like to “play god,” I suppose *becoming* a planetary force is one way.

But there are other much older and much more powerful gods at this table. And, honestly, it's as though we've taken our seat like a loud drunk, kicking the table, throwing our elbows wide, and spilling everyone else's beverages into their laps. They're not happy, these other gods. As planetary forces they are older—much older—than us, and each one on its own is much powerful than we are; taken together, we barely count. Except that we poke them. Relentlessly.

Anthropocene? I'd say we've entered the **Otharktocene**, a word of my own making, that might be roughly translated “*cene*: the new [epoch in which we] *ōthō*: poke [the] *arktos*: bear.” Because that's about all we're really doing right now. Anthropocene suggests we “wield” the force of our impact by some measure of design. No, we're “wielding” nothing so much as belligerent arrogance absent any wisdom.

Even more misleadingly, Anthropocene suggests that, having become *the* decisive player in the Earth System of late, if we rethink our ambitions we can, of course, smooth everything out. We're in the driver's seat, aren't we? Hell no! These ancient planetary processes are forces that channel an inertia beyond our grasp. Ubuntu: this new epoch, like the Holocene, exists at the nexus of a host of relationships. And all those ancient forces are talking to one another. Grumbling in discontent. Screaming in anguish. Writhing in torment. Rising in anger.

Sure, we are the defining force of this new epoch, but *we are defining it merely by poking the bear*. Again and again and again.

Systems seek equilibrium. And these other older forces having been playing the long game for eons. They will eventually settle into a new rhythm. But whether within that new rhythm human activity persists on a scale sufficient to retain our seat at the table remains to be seen. Odds are good that, at best, we'll have a much-chastened role.

At worst, we might find ourselves hurtling toward a Hothouse Earth scenario, with global surface temperatures up by 4-5 degrees Celsius, with ripples and echoes across every planetary process. In that case, the Anthropocene would likely end up naming the trigger point on the way to an epoch so vastly different than the Holocene, so ... inhospitable to humanity, that we—*anthropos*—might find that we have no place at all in it to call home. Oops. *That would be awkward*.

Welcome to the Otharktocene. And, if you missed the memo, it's time to stop poking the bear.

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in writing Community Supported Theology at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.*