

# *Apocalypse*

## *The End or Maybe the Beginning?*

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*Author's Note: What follows is my story. I have made no attempt to argue the points or prove anything – simply told the tale. Should you wish amplification, please consult any of my several books. The story is an old one, and many have told it before.*

We live in the End Time. The signs are all about and startlingly clear. Plague, floods, earthquakes, massive social unrest, invasive species, including the infamous locust. The established social orders appear shaken to their core – tottering on the edge. Some call it the Apocalypse. The word itself, however, might take us in a different direction leading to a different story of our journey.

Apocalypse derives from a Greek word, *apokálypsis*, meaning “uncovering, disclosure, revelation” -- which has nothing to do with disaster and calamity. Were we to allow the original meaning to be our guide, where would that lead? The path I followed led to a more complex tale than the stark disaster epic.

Intimations of an emerging story, driven by the odd clarity of vision that can occur in moments of crisis, came quickly. When everything is working well in our lives, it is difficult to see **how** things are working and what they are doing. Life flows in a seamless stream. It is just life, we say. However, when things fall apart, as in the present moment, the facade of normalcy drops by the wayside, revealing complexity and interconnections we never suspected.

There is no escaping the chaos and pain. People are dying, and horrible things are happening, leaving little space for the happy optimist – and yet amidst the tumult there are interesting sounds and signs of new life. Faint, perhaps, but definitely there.

People long deprived of freedom and a place in the sun, are awakening to their own possibilities. Some, who were forced into servitude by colonial powers have now found their power. Peoples, isolated from new thoughts and opportunities by time and distance, have been awakened by the Internet, the strange new creature in our world which virtually eliminates spatial

and temporal distance, revealing undreamt of opportunities -- a common and continuing experience of the many indigenous peoples of the earth. Others, relegated to dead-end corners of human existence by autocratic domination and the corruption that absolute power fosters, are experiencing the adrenalin rush of their own identity coming into being. The Ukrainian People are a present and potent example.

It would appear that the new story contains equal and paradoxical elements – It is about endings and new beginnings. Both. The old order is dissolving causing great pain and anxiety even as a new one is making its first appearance – which in itself can be painful and nervous making. Those wedded to the old ways look askance at the new, unfamiliar kids on the block. Trouble makers and rabble rousers for sure!

So what's the story? How do we pull together the wild and conflicting elements that flash about our world – to form a coherent tale which makes sense of the world we live in?

The twin elements, *endings and new beginnings* suggest an approach, but such neutral terminology lacks existential punch. Were we to shift to more direct and blatant descriptors – **Death** and **Life** -- the new story becomes infinitely richer and more impactful. But how to capture the exquisite tensions and possibilities inherent in a tale of these primal, polar opposites engaging each other in a productive fashion? Not an either/or, but rather a both/and – and all at once? The answer was glaringly obvious: **Birth**.

Birth, whether that be the physical birth of a child, or societal -- the birth of an idea, institution, process, or movement share common characteristics. No matter the site or situation, Birth involves *ending* and *new beginning*.

When a child is born, particularly the first one, the new parents find themselves in unsettling transformation. Life, once characterized by going out to dinner and jetting off to a vacation spot, is now circumscribed by pampers and feeding times. The joy of the new arrival offsets some of the negatives, but there is no question that the old life is gone, a new one has begun. And woe unto parents who fail to understand the changed reality.

At a societal level, the elements in play are profoundly different, but the process and effects are fundamentally identical. Life as it had been lived, perhaps for many years, is suddenly changed in ways that people can hardly believe. Hunter/Gathers discovered their open

ranges parceled up into neat fields, bounded by fences and populated by farmers. And just a little bit later, the farmers witnessed their pastoral environment over run by an industrial establishment. Some called it progress, and many saw a disaster.

The same effect can be caused by a very different kind of force – The Internet. A product of the human mind, this omnipresent reality has created a wholly new environment for itself and for us: The Cybersphere.

The Cybersphere has its own unique time, space and culture. Participants are identified more often by an email address or website than physical location or cultural antecedents. In conversations they will say to each other, “I will meet you here” when *here* has no more physical reality than a few electrons buzzing in The Cloud. Strange new world with a shattering impact which we are only just beginning to appreciate. For some it a wonderful new reality, others perceive it as “modern convenience” – and for many more it is a terrifying intrusion into their world.

When **Birth** becomes the central image of our new story we can make progress navigating the emerging world. After all, we do know a great deal about birthing and how to handle it. As every woman who has born a child will testify, this critical moment in their lives comes with joyful expectation and major anxiety... and the first piece of advice is -- Breath.

With the arrival of the first pangs of birth, the nine months of expectancy come to an end with shocking abruptness. The baby showers are over and a new and very different experience is breaking out. At such moments in the life of *Homo sapiens*, the autonomic reaction is to hold one’s breath – the universal response to shock, brought on by painful adversity.

Unfortunately, if you hold your breath long enough, a painful situation becomes terminal, which can be resolved only when breathing is restored. To assist with such a passage, many birth preparation programs teach people how to breath and keep breathing: Lamaze, for example. At the inception of birthing, keep breathing!

Restoration of breathing is an essential first step, but just the beginning of comprehending the changed reality that birth has introduced. For some the next phase can be genuine anger – particularly directed at the father. Societally the anger is directed to the innovator credited with change; Bill Gates, Franklin Roosevelt, Galileo. Taken together, Shock and Anger are a recognized 1<sup>st</sup> step of the Griefwork Process which enables human beings to progress from a

radical point of ending to a renewed and fuller life. First described by Elizabeth Keubler Ross in 1969, the 5 stages of grief have become the standard model of the awesome human journey from endings through new beginnings.

The connection of birthing and griefwork is not happenstantial. Birth, as we have noted, is a real ending of a previous life. Not surprisingly, those who experience an ending process it in a way similar to all other such experiences. The stages of griefwork (my version) are: 1. Shock and Anger, 2. Denial, 3. Memories, 4. Open Space 5. Vision and renewal. My version of the Griefwork process obviously owes much to Ross's seminal work and the changes in nomenclature came as I reflected on my own personal experience and my studies of the same process in individuals and organizations.

**Shock and Anger** Shock and anger appear almost instantly with the assault of ending. It is not a considered response, but is universally marked by a sharp intake of breath and a rapid expulsion, often accompanied by the words OH — SHIT! Or the equivalent in whatever language spoken. What may seem like a gratuitous gesture in fact serves a very positive function. When people are in shock they tend to stop breathing. If continued, that is very hazardous to one's health. However, it is virtually impossible to loudly say, "Oh Shit" without breathing in and out.

**Denial** The pain of ending is real and can often be unbearable. Unbearable pain requires some form of anesthesia, and Denial serves that function. Denial appears in multiple guises, most usually in a total refusal (inability) to acknowledge the ending – it just did not happen and no recitation of facts makes any impression. A milder form is what I characterize as "The If Onlies" – if only I hadn't taken that trip, gone to the store, mailed that letter... then the ending would never have happened. But of course it did. The effort may seem futile, but it does offer a momentary surcease from the pain.

For the majority, the pain of ending subsides, and they can move on. However, there are those for whom letting go never happens, and they live their lives in the narrow confines of denial. Fortunately, most people break through – opening the way for a new phase: Memories.

**Memories** As the need for Denial passes, space is opened for a new activity. The fact of ending is acknowledged leading to a certain nostalgia – a remembrance and appreciation of what was lost. New parents will recall their nights on the town and exotic vacations. Societal entities (corporations, cities, civic institutions, villages) recall the past scene. Conversations will start with the phrase – "Do you remember when we ... broke the sales record, brought out a new

product, opened a new food court, celebrated the county fair...? Passers by might feel that everyone is stuck in a past that no longer exists, Memories, however, like all stages in the Griefwork process, has a useful and positive function. By appreciatively reviewing the past, choices can be made between what should be carried forward, and those experiences which have served their time, and need to be let go. This critical time of individual and collective inventory and assessment, prepares the way for whatever comes next.

**Open Space** What comes next is perhaps the most awesome and inspiring moment in human experience. It is awesome because it is filled with infinite possibility, one might say breathtaking. And as *Expiration* occurs, an answering wave rushes to fill the vacuum and breathing resumes. *Inspiration* in the fullest sense. At such a moment everything is gone and every thing is possible.

**Vision and Renewal** Passage from Open Space is often initiated by a simple question, “What are you going to do with the rest of your life?” This question may be asked by a person, usually an empathetic friend, an event such as the rising Sun bringing a new day, or the laughter of a child evoking the joys and pleasures of emergent life. No matter the source, it is always a question, an invitation to engage the future, a suggestion that there could be more to come.

When the answer comes it often begins with the phrase, “I wonder if...” representing a first, tentative step towards renewal. I wonder if I might find a new life partner. I wonder if my broken career, failed business, war torn country...

There is magic in the phrase for when you combine wonder and imagination the door is opened to Vision. This Vision doesn't always happen in a flash. It can emerge slowly, iteratively – a step forward, a step back. But when it does emerge it brings excitement, attraction, and energy – the foodstuff of new life.

Navigating the Griefwork process is a journey each person or group has to do for themselves. Groups do grieve, whole nations grieve and on occasion the planet itself seems to be shedding tears. The journey can be a very lonely one, but there is a role for helpers along the way. That role is *not* to provide answers or direction, both of which can be confusing and obstructive. Real help comes by keeping space open so that the new life has room to breath. Like a midwife, who neither conceives the baby or bears the baby, nevertheless creates a nutrient space in which the young life can thrive.