

A Wave of Nostalgia

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Yesterday, I experienced a wave of nostalgia. That's something rare and unusual for me. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, I welcome it.

Since I left the small town of Florence on the Oregon coast almost five years ago in 2017, I haven't felt any particularly strong sentimentality about the nine years I lived there. This is so despite those nine years having been an exceptional time in my life, a period that — against all the odds — was happier than most other decades of my life.

I moved to Florence in 2008 after suffering an hemorrhagic stroke that should have killed me (but didn't). That stroke was the final event of a long and awful stretch of eight years, where all my foolishness had finally pulled the rug out from under me, where I lost seemingly everything I loved and valued, and where the gods had apparently turned against me. I couldn't get a break for almost ten years and had presumed that any further joy or fulfillment would be impossible. And yet, I was wrong.

Moving to Florence began a renewal in my life that was nothing short of miraculous — a phoenix-like rising from the ashes. Suddenly, the gods smiled and good fortune returned. I found a wonderful place to live in a truly gorgeous setting. I had a dear friend in Florence who helped me build a new social circle. After two years of physical recovery from the stroke, I adapted to my disabilities, and my work as an astrologer not only resumed, but took on a larger perspective that was meaningful and fulfilling.

Although not without some travail, my experience of residing on the Oregon coast was amazing. As a kid raised in the Midwest, I loved living right on the Pacific Ocean. The huge sand dunes in Florence within sight of my apartment were spectacular, as were the coastal mountains just 20 miles to the east. The whole area felt exotic to me — the topography, the weather, even the trees.

By 2012, I was happier than I had been since my 20s. Life was good again, and in ways I couldn't have imagined or predicted. At the time, my intention was to live out the rest of my days in Florence. As it turned out, that wasn't to be. In 2013, my dear friend went crazy, which was very sad. A year later, my landlord (who lived in the house to which my wonderful apartment was attached) was

killed in the crash of his private plane. I knew on that day that my life in Florence would eventually come to an end, although that took another three years.

In 2017, I left Oregon and moved back to Columbia, Missouri, where I had gone to college in the late 1960s and lived happily through most of my 20s, after which I moved to the Twin Cities in Minnesota in 1978. Relocating to Missouri after four decades away didn't feel great, but it was necessary. And though it took awhile, I've adapted to my resumed life here. Being back in Columbia suits me, especially with the benefit of some friends I've known for 50 years.

I was 67 when I returned. I'm 72 now. Like so many people in my age cohort, I'm very aware of being on the downward slope of the mountain. While I'm sure there are people in their 70s or older who are vibrant and healthy, I don't know any of them. But beyond the passing of my particular generation, I am struck by the dramatic change in the collective zeitgeist over my lifetime. When I was born, there were two and a half billion people on the planet. Now there are more than seven billion. And while America changed dramatically over the first 50 years of my life, that pales compared to the changes over the initial two decades of this 21st century. Even more, the acceleration of those changes over just the past five years is truly breathtaking, and not in a good way.

The world — meaning America and modern civilization — always struck me as crazy, but this country now feels a hundred times crazier in ways that are unsettling and dangerous. I'm not talking about COVID, but more the general state of collective madness that seems to have infected damn near everyone. I blame the monsters for that. By monsters, I mean the ruling elites who are obsessed with wealth, power, and control, and who do not give a flying fig about the rest of us. Their idea of the common good is sure as hell not mine. The world they are creating is not a world I want to live in.

I ask myself, *"Who are all those people who seem to believe that life in America is just fine, thank you. How are they able to distract themselves and maintain such denial?"* It's not hard for me to imagine that some people are getting what they want for themselves, but I don't understand how they can shut out everything else, which they seem to do quite easily.

Maybe there aren't as many of these people as I assume. Maybe most of us are just too easily manipulated. I mean, it does seem that waves of hatred are sweeping over the land, causing many of us to loathe others of us. We know now without any doubt that the Us-versus-Them dynamic is deeply embedded in our genes. It's hard-wired. We love those we consider Us, but we don't give a damn about those we consider Them. The nasty phenomenon of generalized, knee-jerk disdain is worsened hundred-fold in society by the endless drumbeat of propaganda narratives about others being crazy, wrong, and evil. The algorithms of social media platforms are designed to amplify that negativity.

Some people see this as the ultimate conspiracy, with the monsters successfully using the strategy of dividing us to squabble and fight amongst ourselves, leaving them free to pursue their nefarious goals of world domination at any cost. Many of these narratives hold that the monsters fully intend to kill off most of us, and it sure looks like we're headed down that road.

I tend to believe that this is not an organized conspiracy by a secret cabal of ultimate monsters, but instead a *de facto* conspiracy — more likely the sum total of ten thousand smaller schemes that amount to unconscious agreements reinforced by in-group social approval. In other words, I lean away from the presumption of any singular, overriding evil plot and toward the more commonplace notion of collective human frailty. In my mind, it's a little like the madness that may overtake a group of otherwise normal human beings and transform them into a lynch mob. It's just that this particular mob owns damn near everything, controls most of the money and power, and makes all the decisions about how to run the country and the world.

Most of us (by which I mean everyone I know) have many facets, some of which are kind and loving, others of which can be cruel and uncaring. We have it in us to be both saints and devils. At their best, both family and society encourage us toward kindness and love while discouraging cruelty and disdain. And yes, the culture we live in does some of this, at least in lip service, but too often both family and society do the opposite — encouraging, rewarding, and reinforcing our more despicable facets.

The carrots of ego-gratification are dangled in front of our faces, and we respond. Many of us aren't strong enough to resist such social approval of our worst instincts. We go along to get along, seeking social reinforcement for whatever we want (or have been told that we should want), and over time, with sufficient encouragement, we may become small monsters. If we are rewarded by our social groups in major ways — wealth being the primary seduction, along with fame, celebrity, and power — some of us eventually devolve into major monsters. Not all of us, of course. Privilege doesn't corrupt everyone. Many people want to share their good fortune and success, to give back some of what they've been given, but enough people fall prey to narcissism that society suffers a real coarsening.

Among the beliefs I hold (and have held for a long time) is the assumption that any terrible thing you can think of — no matter how awful — is actually being done somewhere in the world right now. Not just in fantasy or dreams, not just on TV or in the movies, but in real life. Human beings are capable of anything, from the highest good to the deepest evil. And, as they say, "*There, but for the grace of God, go I.*" To be shocked by what some humans do is to not know oneself, because we all are potential monsters. There's an old saying in astrology: "*Character is destiny.*" And yet, we know that character is shaped

by a thousand factors — nature, nurture, circumstance, and even luck may influence who we are. And social encouragement is a huge factor.

Are some people just monstrous from the get-go? Maybe. It does appear that once a certain critical mass is reached in our ways of being in the world, those attitudes and beliefs often harden into concrete, which can be for good or ill. When what becomes habituated and routinized in us turns out to be cruel and uncaring (even though we are unlikely to see that in ourselves), those qualities become very difficult to change.

Does this mean that redemption is impossible? Once a monster, always a monster? No, I think redemption is possible. It's just uncommon. For every person who awakens from damaging personal delusion, ten others stay asleep and continue down whatever path they're on. Forms of expression may change, but more often the toxic substance remains.

I've written recently that the monsters have won. This is not new or recent. The monsters have been winning for a long time. A metaphysical perspective that's relevant to this unpleasant perception is that the human species on the earth is a laboratory for young, evolving souls or spirits. Essentially, we're babies, eager for experience. We're typically not mature enough to understand the repercussions of our unconsidered actions. Even when we are, we often go ahead anyway. However inadvertently, we end up causing suffering for ourselves and for others.

In this narrative, we can expect human life, society, and civilization itself to be horribly screwed up, because we're learning as we go — learning by making terrible, painful mistakes. Distinguishing reality from illusion is a long, hard road. Buddhism doesn't speak of the "Wheel of Samsara" as some light-hearted joke. It is the oceanic ego-delusion in which we all swim. From that perspective, the evolution of collective humanity necessarily occurs only one person at a time. Expecting some magical mass awakening into harmony and compassion is not what we are about, despite what some people hope.

I would prefer this not to be true, but it seems to be the way things are. It's one reason I see the collapse of modern civilization as not only inevitable, but our only way through this. Picking up the pieces and starting over is probably our best shot for continuation of the species, however negative that may seem.

Meanwhile, each of us can and should appreciate whatever joy we are given, whether current or in memory. My nine years on the Oregon coast may be just a nostalgic reminiscence at this point, but they count as goodness in my life. Perhaps that's some of what old age is — looking back to recognize, reinterpret, and reclaim the goodness that mattered.