

“The Rapture for Progressives”

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August 29, 2010

According to a Pew Trust Foundation Poll, four out of ten Americans believe that the second coming will occur before the year 2050. Four out of ten people in our country believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth, and it will happen within 40 years. I wonder how many of them believe the rest of the predictions of this scenario, as the most conservative Christians interpret the book of Revelations. I wonder if they also believe that when this happens, The Lord will gather up his faithful followers and take them to heaven, leaving the rest of the world to languish in eternal torment. Do they believe that there is, or will be an anti-Christ, who will require people to show their allegiance by taking the mark of the beast, that is the number 666, either on the back of their hand, or on the forehead? Some versions predict a reign of evil and chaos led by this anti-Christ that will occur *before* the rapture, and will show us that it’s coming. Others predict the reign of evil and chaos will take place *after* the rapture as a sign that it has happened. Either way, it’s a pretty amazing story to believe.

I once believed it. It was taught to me as a young teenager. As I shared with you a few weeks ago, I was part of the born-again movement in the early 1970s. I was saved, and was given a fairly strict set of criteria as to what that required. The Rapture was our version of what theologians would call Eschatology – which comes from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning “last”, and *logos*, meaning “word”. Eschatology means speaking of final things. It’s about our ultimate hopes, or whatever we think we are heading for. Probably the most widely believed eschatology in our culture is about what happens when we die, whether we are headed for heaven or hell. The Rapture simply ratchets this notion of heaven and hell up several notches, and applies it to the whole world all at once. It takes the perverse, and you might think, nonsensical approach of providing hope and meaning by means of fear. And it worked. Our youth group was shown a film that was meant to warn and instruct us, entitled, “You’ve Been Left Behind.” It frightened me for years, even after I left the fold and no longer rationally believed in it.

In our youth group, we were told this story by adults we loved and trusted. They – and many people - believe in it whole-heartedly. The “Left Behind” series of books and films still sells in the millions. In a poll taken in New Jersey by a Public Policy polling firm, when asked if Barack Obama was the anti-Christ, 8% of people polled said yes. Thirteen percent said they weren’t sure. (That’s an interesting response: “You know I’m still thinking about that one. Let me get back to you.”) So add these together, and you have 21% who think he either IS or COULD BE the anti-Christ. You have to wonder why the pollsters thought this was an important data point to measure, but the response is still remarkable. There are websites that track prophecies to current events, such as “Rapture Ready.Com”. Bill Moyers points out that people who believe in the rapture make up a significant voting bloc. Members of my family, who are Jehovah’s Witnesses, also believe in a version of this story. Intelligent, educated people.

Why? The world is a pretty frightening place. The evidence of global warming is becoming overwhelming, with temperatures rising, glaciers melting, island villages disappearing, hurricanes becoming more and more destructive. The economy is not recovering – either as fast as it ought to be, or at all, depending on who you listen to. The news is abysmal regarding foreclosure rates and jobless rates – 9 ½% nationally, worse in some parts of the country. There is terrorism, which has no neat national borders to contain an “enemy” – they are simply anywhere, which allows people to suspect others, especially Muslims, and as we’ve been hearing, perpetrate violence on them. The damage from natural disasters, like the earthquake in Haiti and the floods in Pakistan, as well as the lingering devastation from Katrina in New Orleans, seem like more than we can handle.

It’s pretty overwhelming. It’s a lot to carry around inside. Given all this, I’d say a cosmic story of a battle between good and evil, with a rescue by a powerful God, makes complete emotional sense. It is right on par with this level of fear. If you can put what is happening into predicted patterns and give it religious meaning – and if you can offer comforting instructions on how to be part of the winning side – believe this, reject that, live as the Bible says you should (or our interpretation of that) – then it would help you cope. Karen Armstrong says that the grip this story has within America, particularly the projection of the Anti-Christ onto a real person, our president, is a “sign of an unhappy society.” (“Fresh Air” interview, September 21, 2009)

Or a fearful one. I’m reminded of a scene I read about, from an upcoming documentary called, “Waiting for Superman.” This film tells the story of the Harlem Children’s Zone, or HCZ, which is a strategic effort in New York to radically change education in one neighborhood. Its director, Geoffrey Canada, opens the film, describing a moment from his childhood growing up in Harlem. He says, “One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me Superman did not exist. I read comic books and I just loved ’em ... ’cause even in the depths of the ghetto you just thought, ‘He’s coming, I just don’t know when, because he always shows up and he saves all the good people.’ ”

Then when he was in fourth or fifth grade, he asked, “Ma, do you think Superman is actually [real]?” She told him the truth: “ ‘Superman is not real.’ I was like: ‘He’s not? What do you mean he’s not?’ ‘No, he’s not real.’ And she thought I was crying because it’s like Santa Claus is not real. And I was crying because there was no one ... coming with enough power to save us.” (Tom Friedman, “Steal This Movie, Too”, New York Times Op Ed Column, August 25, 2010)

The Rapture is such a strange idea, it’s easy to make fun of. Praying for Superman to show up is a sad idea, and it’s easy to feel pity for a child who felt that Superman was his best hope. And both ideas become immediately more understandable when you consider how afraid we all can be. All of us. How susceptible we are to this longing for a rescue. A big swath of American voters did the same thing a few years ago. You may or may not have voted for Barack Obama, but many who did were swept up in the notion that he was going to save our country. And while progressive voters probably wouldn’t agree that Obama is the anti-Christ, they are counted among the most critical of the president. The Huffington Post reports that progressives are disappointed in the president for his decision to increase troops in Afghanistan, for his lack of

speaking out on issues like same-sex marriage, and for the health care and economic recovery legislation that do not, by many lights, go far enough. (Lincoln Mitchell, “The Obama Disappointment and Its Cost” Huffington Post, August 28, 2010), Good people are still hurting. The messiah did not come.

But, as the Baal Shem Tov would say, “You are here. And that is good.” A rabbi friend of mine insists that there have always been Jews who have not located the Messiah in a single human being, but among all the people, all the people caring for the world. That is their eschatology, or source of ultimate hopes. As Unitarian Universalists, it has always been our answer, too. The Spirit of Life, or as some would say, God, is not separate from us, and depends upon us to save the world. Or you might say, we are the ones we have been waiting for, we are our own best hope.

Geoffrey Canada, the founder and director of the Harlem Children’s Zone, is a good example. His work is about what happens when you give up waiting for Superman. It’s what happens when you love children so much that you put them first. HCZ “uses a comprehensive strategy, including a prenatal Baby College, social service programs and longer days at its charter schools.” Its strength is not a superhero, though when I met Geoffrey Canada several years ago, I was momentarily fooled. He is a powerful presence. The enduring strength of his programs is the patience, love and tenacity – the “quiet heroism”, as Tom Friedman put it – of all the people working together in doing what we know works. (Tom Friedman, “Steal This Movie Too”)

No Messiah. No superhero. No cosmic battle, deciding things once and for all. I think we know this. The problem is, we get weary. Rebecca Parker points out that the social gospel, which argues that we must work to create God’s kingdom on earth, is exhausting. For we are never *there*, it never really arrives. We focus on our ideals, which are always, tantalizingly at a distance. “*Ideals* do not administer spiritual assistance [to us],” she writes. “They do not come to the kitchen table in the night of fear... *Ideals* do not surround the soul with comfort or refreshment and renew the heart’s courage. For this, something tangible and alive is needed. Something present now.” (Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens, *A House for Hope*)

Focusing on ideals alone is thin gruel, like a gruff jab to the shoulder and an urging to “Buck up!” They are the world of some day, and not now. The world of the future, and not this one. They are part of the world of “not enough”.

And we live so much of the time in a state of “not enough”. Walter Brueggemann calls it “anxious scarcity”. We want more. What Rebecca Parker called for in our modern reading this morning was for us to cultivate a sense of abundance of the here and now. A reverence for the world, as imperfect as it is, as “holy ground”. To remember that we are in a garden. And not to turn our backs on the problems of the world – as if we could – but to love the world so much that we recognize the good things in it that keep us going, that keep our hope alive, and keep us working to make things better. If we love the world enough, we will care for it. But first we have to be here now.

If the first element of our eschatology is “we are the messiah”, the second is “be here now.” This we borrow from Eastern traditions, but also the part of Christianity that has always insisted, “The kingdom is within you. The kingdom is among you. Always and already. Now.” We need to be fully present to engage it.

And we are not, friends. Our attention is becoming more and more fragmented. We have more and more streams of data, of incoming information and communication. Recently, I heard an interview on Fresh Air with Matt Richtel, a technology reporter for the New York Times. He calculates that we now consume three times the amount of information in a day than we used to in 1960. We get so much of it so fast that we no longer have time to process anything we take in. We become worse at filtering out irrelevant information. And we can lose our capacity to focus on one thing at a time. “Fresh Air” Interview, August 24, 2010) To give ourselves to the immediate moment.

This summer, Robert and I were invited to join a group of friends who were all going to Longwood Gardens’ Fireworks and Fountains show, featuring music of the Beatles. Someone in the group, who works at Longwood, went in early and tied sheets around a few benches with bungee cords, near the conservatory. These were some fabulous seats that looked down on the great expanse of the grounds, now filled with 3,000 people. As it was getting darker, I looked out and noticed something interesting. Distributed among this sea of people, was a smaller sea of small, glowing squares. About every 20th person, it appeared, was holding an i-phone, Blackberry, i-pad or some such device. They were stroking it, jabbing it, or simply gazing at it expectantly. At first I thought people were just restless before the beginning of the show, which had been delayed. But even when it started, most of the squares stayed lit. They were lit up the whole time. Doris Lessing once wrote that hell was the place where the lights were on all the time. Hell is a state of hypervigilance that never allows us to rest. Here we were – in some of the most magnificent gardens in the world – paradise by anyone’s standards. We were surrounded by beauty and beloved music. And a good chunk of us simply couldn’t give ourselves over to it. I imagined someone texting her experience to a friend: “OMG! I’m in awe!” I would have replied, “U R not in awe. U R texting.”

Dividing ourselves starves our capacity for awe. We lose our ability to fully connect to our immediate world. If we love what we pay attention to, you could argue, this division of our attention starves our capacity to love. It feeds our restless desire for more. And the insatiable desire for more, argues Rebecca Parker, is what got us into trouble in the first place.

Don’t get me wrong, I love the access that we have to information and the connections I make with people on it – I hear more about the lives of my nieces and nephews on Facebook in a week, for example, than I would in a year. But it is tremendously easy to overdo. While I have not yet succumbed to the magic of the glowing square – I don’t give out my cell number because it’s usually turned off – I have a terrible internet and e-mail habit. I tend to check several times a day; it punctuates whatever else I’m doing. I think about what’s in my e-mail when I’m talking to Robert at dinner. Why?

Matt Richtel would say it is because I crave the stimulus. In the interview, Terry Gross pondered why she can’t resist checking her e-mail before she goes to bed at night. When pressed, she said that she sort of hopes for a small gift to be there – a personal letter, the presence

of a friend. However, each e-mail is a demand, too. It calls for a response; it's another rabbit we must chase, says Richtel. To use another analogy, we are conditioned like rats who learn that if they press a lever they will get a food pellet. They keep pressing the lever, even when there's been no food pellet for a good while. They're hooked. And so are we.

You may be among the lucky ones who are not swept up in what Matt Richtel calls "the screen invasion". Some personalities are better at resistance than others. But more and more people around you are. And you are being cut off from them.

If we are to be here now, we must find ways to rest, to be present in the garden, the lovely garden that is here now. We must give our minds the opportunity to process things more slowly. And we must not be afraid to ask for the complete attention of others when we are with them. If we love the world enough to care about its problems, we must slow all down. We must love this garden enough to care for it.

We can deepen our connections with other people, and learn to love them as they are, too. The late psychotherapist Carl Rogers discovered the amazing paradox that people only change when they are accepted exactly as they are. This includes people we love – our church community, our family, our friends. This includes ourselves. It also includes strangers and people we don't agree with. We feel more frightened when we don't see people as people. We feel more stressed and alone when we see others as separate and wholly different from us. We don't have to do this. We can slow down and remind ourselves to see everyone as a human being with a life. The person waiting on you at the 7-11 is not just there to serve you. She has a full life. She might be deeply in love. She might be afraid of losing her job. This might be her second or third job, and she might wish she were home, putting her child to bed. Seeing her as a whole person is a worthy spiritual practice in loving the world.

Unitarian Universalist psychologist and author Mary Pipher says, "I want to be part of the rescue team for our tired, overcrowded planet. The rescuers will be those people who help other people to think clearly, and to be honest and open-minded." (Mary Pipher, *Writing to Change the World*) I like this eschatology: being part of a rescue team. And how else would we do it, other than to help people think clearly, and to be honest and open-minded? But we must start with nurturing these qualities in ourselves. We must do the things that allow us to love. Fear is real. And so is love. Aim for love. Amen.