

Chapter 1

The End of the World as We Know It

In spite of all the wonders of modern society, I often feel that these are tragic times in the life of our planet and our species. Many of us fear that the world as we know it and the hopes that we have had for it are passing away. Many of us feel uncertain how to participate meaningfully in these times. Sometimes we don't even want to think about world affairs because the situation seems so depressing to us. Strange as it may seem, the New Testament speaks to such feelings in its passages about the end of the world.

Perhaps, like me, you have been puzzled by New Testament passages referring to the end of the world and the coming of the Son of Man. Literal understandings fail to produce anything helpful. What does the end of the world mean and who is this Son of Man? "The Son of Man" can be translated "the son of Adam," but what does this mean? I find it helpful to assume that "the Son of Adam" has to do with the return of our original humanity. So, I find it illuminating to substitute "the Essential Human" for the ancient phrase "the Son of Adam" in the following passage from Mark's gospel:

"... the light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light; stars will be falling from the sky and the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations. Then humans will see *the Essential Human* coming in the clouds with great power and glory. . . . So when you see these things happening, you may know that *the Essential Human* is near, at your very doors! I tell you that this generation will not have passed until all these things have come true. Earth and sky will pass away, but what I have told you will never pass away!" (Mark 13:24-31, J.B. Philips)

Mark placed these strange words in the mouth of Jesus about 65 years after Jesus' birth. The Jesus Seminar scholars assess these words as having very low probability of being sayings of the historical Jesus. So why did the earliest Christians find such words meaningful? How could they imagine Jesus saying these things? Such questions cannot be answered unless we can see how these words might be meaningful to us in our generation.

First of all, we know that the literal sun was not darkened in the generation that heard Jesus speak. The moon did not fail to give her light. The stars did not fall. Earth and sky have not passed away. So what did happen in the lives of these earliest Christians that is related to such images? And what is happening in our lives today that can be related to such images?

It is helpful to me to view these words as a kind of dream. If you or I were to awaken from a dream with such images in it, we might ask: "What feelings in my awake life are expressed by these images? Have I had moments that were like this? Have I felt that the sun was indeed darkening, the moon ceasing to shine, the stars falling from the sky, the powers of the cosmos rocking on their foundations?" In other words, have we ever felt as if the world as we know it were coming to an end?

In our personal lives we sometimes say of certain events, "That was the end of the world for me." Such an expression might apply to the experience of losing someone who was prominent in our life. Perhaps leaving a field of work was like the end of the world. Perhaps the collapse of a political ideology or an old philosophy of life ended the world as we knew it. Perhaps some change in our scientific view of the physical cosmos seemed like a world-ending experience.

Indeed, it was a big deal when humans first saw that the Earth was not flat, that the Earth was not sitting on foundations at all, that stars do not fall because there is no cosmic up or down, that all stars and planets are swimming in a vast scope of space.

Perhaps it was a big deal for some of us when we saw that the cosmos is not a big machine going round and round in static circles, but rather a many-billion-year-old temporal process, an emerging unfoldment of unrepeatable stages of cosmogenesis of which we are a self-aware expression.

Only a few decades ago, we lived in a time of cold war between communism and capitalism. It seemed then that this horrifically threatening stalemate would never end, but it did. That world came to an end.

It has been said of the events of September 11, 2001 that those airplanes crashing into buildings in New York and Washington, D.C. ended the world as we knew it. It may be true that many members of a slumbering population were awakened to a wider sense of reality. At least many of us are now more aware of the extent that mistrust and hatred is felt toward the governmental actions of this nation. The response to the 9/11 events led by the U.S. president has been to fan fears, to exaggerate the need for military solutions, and to promote a further expansion of the military industrial complex. Such views do not represent the end of the world as we know it; they are a continuation of a view of the world that has dominated the thinking of many U.S. leaders and citizens for decades. The end of the world is indeed happening, but on a much deeper level.

Today we live in a world in which huge, profit-greedy, transnational corporations rule the world – our economies, our democratic bodies, our legal systems, our trade-regulating agencies, our television screens, newspapers, schools, universities, and healthcare systems. This disastrously inappropriate world is coming to an end. It is not a matter of whether but how and when. For many of us it has already come to an end as the world we envision and hope to see in the future. Perhaps we are able to imagine an ecologically sustainable network of responsible local regions of plants, animals, and humans of all races, sexes, cultures, and religions living in a mutually enhancing interrelatedness. Whatever the particulars of our vision of the future and our sense of how that future might come to pass, our having such a vision means that the current world has come to an end for us.

Many of us no longer view the world as a perpetually growing cornucopia of material progress. We no longer believe that wealth amassed in the upper echelons of our society will appropriately trickle down to everyone. Though movement toward a shared prosperity has been and still is a potentiality of industrialism, we now observe the gap between rich and poor rapidly increasing. Today we see a failed economic system that is making the rich richer, the poor poorer, and the Earth devastated. This is spawning horrific suffering and conflict throughout the world. Indeed, upon our familiar industrial world the sun is going dark; the moon is losing its shine; and the stars are falling. The foundations of the world as we know it are shaking.

In the context of such an understanding, let us listen again to these words:

“So when you see these things happening, you may know that the Essential Human is near, at your very doors! I tell you that this generation will not have passed until all these things have come true. Earth and sky will pass away, but what I have told you will never pass away!”

We may have viewed biblical teachings about the end of the world as gloomy, but that is clearly not the case with these verses. These verses imply that seeing the end of the world is a step forward, a step toward finding what we have always sought, wanted, and deeply needed – namely, the coming of the Essential Human, (the son of Adam, the Jesus Humanity). In other

words, the ending of the world is the doorway to our true being. Whatever “world” we live in, it was not always here, and it will not always be here. Everything passes away. Yet, according to the above Scripture, there is an exception: the truth Jesus told us does not pass away. So what did he tell us? He revealed to us our Essential Humanity. Indeed, he enabled us to experience for ourselves our Essential Humanity. Though our worlds all pass away, our Essential Humanity does not pass away. When the world as we know it comes to an end, we find that our Essential Humanity is being exposed; it is standing at the door ready to be lived. However strange this may sound, these truths were also told to us by the Buddha and every authentic person in every culture and in every era. We are, in our deep actuality, an Essential Humanity that does not pass away.

So what exactly is our Essential Humanity? Who is that Essential Human who draws near to us in the midst of our collapsing world? The Christian tradition uses three terms more than any others to describe our Essential Spirit Being: (1) faith in or Trust of Final REALITY, (2) Freedom from inner bondage, and (3) a Love for the WHOLE which includes Compassion for self and others.

The opposite of Trust is suspicion. As long as we feel safe and secure in the world as we know it, we live in suspicion. When living in the cocoon of our world, we are suspicious of REALITY. We tend to ignore REALITY or to defend our world from REALITY. Thus, when the world comes to an end in any of the ways described above, we find that the Essential Humanity of Trust is at the doors of our life. We only need to let Trust of REALITY come in and reign. We don't have to manufacture Trust. Trust is who we are. Small children, unless they have been damaged by poor care, Trust REALITY. They are curious and open to whatever actualities there may be. Such Trust is at the doors when we adults experience, for example, the end of the world as a perpetually growing cornucopia of monetary progress. Like children, we can, in our essential Trust of REALITY, step out of this limited world into whatever challenges actually face us. Thereby, we can become true adults who stand present to the terror of history, to the grimness of death, as well as to all the pleasure, bliss, joy, and contentment life provides. In such Trust we can refuse to swallow the hype, advertising, and propaganda that spin half truths in the service of some passing purpose. In Trust we can refuse to fall into sentimentality or morosity, thereby hiding from REALITY in whichever familiar feelings make us comfortable. In Trust we can note the enormity of our lack of Trust; we can discover that Trust also means accepting the Eternal Welcome Home to REALITY in spite of all our running away to those dismal far countries of delusion.

The opposite of Freedom is bondage. As long as we feel safe and secure in the world as we know it, we live in bondage. We simply do what is expected of us in that world. We fit in; we conform; we explain away all the deluded, greedy, and malicious aspects of this current world. In this industrialized, consumer-driven world, “freedom” has come to mean license to follow whatever whims people's advertisement-shaped egos crave. “Freedom” as “free enterprise” has come to mean unregulated license for businesses to do whatever makes money. True Freedom means the death of this limited world, the death of our habits of personality, the death of victim images and fatalistic thinking, the death of our self judgments and self grandiosity. Freedom means finding release from these tangled webs that bind us in habits of slavery. True Freedom is the very opposite of our self-absorbed weaknesses, our greedy cravings, and our despairing despondencies. When the world comes to an end in any of the ways described above, we find that the Essential Humanity of Freedom is at the doors of our life. Though Freedom may be frightening, Freedom is also experienced as a glorious liberty, enabling us to perform as the yeast that leavens the whole lump of humanity, as the vanguard who initiate the vital, unprecedented futures for this entire planet.

The opposite of Compassion is malice. As long as we feel safe and secure in the world as we know it, we live in malice toward REALITY and toward any neighbor who opposes or challenges our world. Compassion is the ability and the willingness to be with others in their various forms of suffering. True Compassion does not delude people with sentiment but is a realistic PRESENCE. Being with people in Compassion can assist them to find their own way through the tangles that trap them in despairing unhappiness. Compassion also means assuming responsibility for the social fabrics of the entire planet within the ACTUAL situations we face. Compassion means carefully yet boldly designing our own specific contributions. Compassion includes realistically affirming our own selves – willing to patiently and persistently be with our own weaknesses, sufferings, challenges, courage, and joy. Compassion is not a moral virtue that must be or can be achieved through personal effort; it bubbles up as needed whenever we are living in surrender to REALITY. When the world comes to an end in any of the ways described above, we find that the Essential Humanity of Compassion is at the doors of our life. And such Compassion is as ordinary as breathing and as true to life as death.

When the world as we know it comes to an end, the Essential Humanity of Trust, Freedom, and Compassion is near, is at our very doors.

Endnote on capitalizations: Whenever the word “REALITY” is used to mean the WHOLENESS out of which all things emerge and into which all things return, I will capitalize the whole word. Other words such as “MYSTERY” will also be written in upper case when these words indicate this same WHOLENESS. I will capitalize the first letter of other words such as Trust, Freedom, Compassion, Awe, Spirit, Love, as well as the Awesome, the Awed Ones, and the Essential Human, Essential Being, and Being. These capitalizations indicate that these words are pointing to aspects of the one experience of REALITY. When these same words do not have this meaning, they will be kept in lower case.