

No Hope

by Bill Herbst

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Today's post is not really a commentary. It's more like a short memo from the home office. And it's not an inspirational pep talk. Instead, it's a recognition of capitulation, an acknowledging of the harsh truth of our situation.

In metaphor, we are the Bad News Bears. It's not even the seventh inning of the game yet, but the score is already 59-0 against us. Unlike Little League, however, there is no 10-run rule that ends the game prematurely to spare whatever remains of the defeated team's mangled dignity. No, we're in the Major Leagues, and all games must be played out to their final conclusion, however gruesome that may be for those on the losing side.

All of us are both participants and spectators — players and observers. So, we will continue to take the field and attempt a defense even as Death Culture scores run after run after run. Each out we manage will be celebrated on the sidelines, and we might even score a run or two in our brief rounds at bat, but none of our tiny victories will matter as the score continues to mount against us. The die is cast. The heavy hitters of Death Culture will rule the day, and the Monsters will be victorious.

As players, we must (to quote Emperor Hirohito in his brief address over radio to the Japanese people to announce Japan's surrender at the close of World War II) "endure the unendurable." As spectators, however, we are free to leave the stands and go home any time we wish. No one is forcing us to watch the pitiful spectacle of this one-sided contest. So, if you've been rooting for the home team, take heart. Not everyone needs to bear further witness to the slaughter on the field.

Sure, some of us do need to stay informed, especially those who are reporters or broadcasters. For the vast majority of fans, however, it's OK to pack up our gear, leave the stands, and head for home.

Taken out of the sports metaphor and returned temporarily to the crucible of real life, what I'm saying is that civilizational collapse is now so obvious and inevitable that many of us are feeling the despair that inundates the psyche when all hope has been lost — real hope, false hope, true optimism, fake optimism, whatever. When those dams, either real or imagined, finally break after all our efforts and

cherished illusions have cracked, crumbled, and given way, then we are flooded with despair. And, of course, despair sucks. But just as false hope and fake optimism are clearly illusions, so is despair. Reality itself is neither hopeful nor despairing. Both those categories — elevation and depression, hope and despair — are false, mere human twists of perspective.

Some of the world's most profound spiritual traditions tell us that the solution to despair can be realized in the release of all attachments and expectations. That ultimate answer may be well and good in philosophy or the lofty realms of intellect, but it's simply a bridge too far for most of us. Way too far. Most of us are not spiritual devotees who have tirelessly worked the discipline of ego-transcendence and release of attachments, and even if we have leaned in that direction, damned few of us have achieved the desired end. (One irony here is that wanting to let go of desire makes it even harder to do...). My point is simply that most of us are not Christ, Buddha, Krishna, or Muhammad. We are flawed and fallible humans, ordinary people, so preaching to us about Enlightenment might not be the most practical strategy for helping us deal with what life can and does dish out.

So, without pretending that what I'm about to offer is wise, let me suggest a less complete approach. Not a solution, but a kind of temporary experiment, akin to *"Take two aspirin and call me in the morning."* Admittedly, this may not succeed in banishing the suffering, pain, and humiliation of despair, but it might lessen the severity of those demons by providing at least temporary relief, a "brief time-out," as it were.

Take refuge in goodness wherever you find it. Accept peace of mind and even perhaps some joyful experience whenever and however they are offered. For instance, brains like habit and rhythm, so focus on small, seemingly insignificant tasks can provide meaningful respite from the travail of loss and indignity. Any interaction with another person that awakens our hearts is a good thing, even for a moment. If you're an organizer (as I am), then organize everything you can. Motion and movement are cleansing for many of us, so, if you're a kinetic, physical type, move your body. Exertion is stimulating. Dance if you're able, but if you can't dance, at least listen to music. Doesn't matter if it's classical, heavy metal, or hip-hop — whatever kind of music allows life to flow inside us is good.

Drugs are tricky, of course. They work amazingly well for a short time, but they often carry lousy side effects and long-term complications. We're trying to stimulate the production of endorphins in our brains, and that is best done gently, without damaging the biological systems in us that create those neurotransmitters. So use drugs carefully. Heck, from one perspective, everything we like is a drug. Love, hope, beauty, tasty food — all those are drugs in one way or another. So use them all judiciously. Getting drunk on anything creates a brief illusion of escape into freedom, but the end result of those excessive episodes is a return to ever-deepening despair.

Somewhat curiously, feeling sadness about what has been or inevitably will be lost might be beneficial. Despair is the boomerang of denial, and grieving for our losses acknowledges that reality changes without our permission. After all, tears are the universal solvent. Despair makes us numb and dry. Tears revivify and rehydrate us.

The collapse of civilization does not mean that no goodness exists in the world. Whatever happens, goodness still abounds in and around us. No, I wouldn't dare to suggest that innate goodness provides a dependable antidote to intense pain and deep suffering. Sometimes nothing can provide relief. And I'm not saying that we must hold ourselves together tightly while the world around us collapses. No, allowing ourselves to be changed is part of adapting to reality.

To return to the earlier sports metaphor, what I'm suggesting — really, *all* I'm suggesting — is that we leave the stands, stop watching the game and obsessing about it, and go home to whatever goodness we're stored up there. We do not need to continue to punish ourselves as spectators to a bad game.

I get it that billions of us are addicted to screens. Whenever possible, turn off your TV, shut down your laptop, and power down your smart phone. Even as little as one hour a day less screen time can be immensely beneficial in restoring sanity and avoiding despair. The virtual reality of screens is the equivalent of bad food, and watching them constantly keeps us captive as spectators.

If you can't stop watching, though, don't beat yourself up. Just try the other things I mentioned or whatever alternatives you can come up with on your own. Any way you can protect your humanity and not succumb to Death Culture is worthwhile.