

Apocatastasis

I was originally going to travel to central Australia with friends. We were going to head to 'The Rock'. Due to an unexpected, tragic event, my friends needed to cancel. I've headed to the periphery by myself—I'm at the most easterly point of the continent. I haven't gone for swims or rainforest walks yet. I've been writing in crouched postures in the shade, instead. Bush Turkeys wander around the underbrush of the palm trees here in Byron Bay and the ocean waves shush in the wind along with the cicadas. However, it's not the paradise I expected. In the town centre 'Sportsgirl' and 'Ripcurl' line the streets and rugby player types, with their booming voices, wallow by the edge of every waterhole. They are paperweights holding down a new contract for this place (I almost got knocked over by a very clean four-wheel-drive yesterday!). I sense that the elves are starting their retreat to The Eternal Realms. Crystals can't keep progress at bay.

I don't know Byron Bay at all—its history or people. I'm neither jock nor hippy. I'm only here briefly on a whim. I bring my judgements and expectations (like everyone else) to the hinterlands of all Edens. We all try to sneak back into Paradise with our histories covered by fig leaves. Persistently, the angelic sentinels keep us out with their flaming sword. The fruit of knowledge has left its effect on us but its fibre is not inside us anymore. It has passed through us violently and we spray that shit all over the place. We can only console ourselves with facsimiles of Eden these days—with theme parks. Without let up, we make many types of faecal patty-cake and fling them all over the landscape irrespective of how close we are to our drinking water. We make do.

Since entry is barred to Paradise, our desperate hope is for disaster. We want Nature to have a tantrum for us because we can't get our own way. We want to be smugly confident that we are the rational ones in the argument. We want the gale-force winds to blow down, the waves to swallow up and the lava to spread itself thick all over our cultural concrete. We want a sizzling new state of affairs; we want to see the washed and uncluttered horizon again. And, if Nature, in its indifferent patience, is not forthcoming we know just how to get it all started if we need to. We know which buttons to push. We are powerful now that we know what happens to flint smacked together. Surely, Primal Life will always germinate and rise from the razed. Surely, dawn will always kiss the darkness. Surely, Alpha will greet Omega and Genesis will find fulfillment in Revelations. Surely, Jonas will always find himself through myth and by way of heavy-handed metaphor. Surely, you do to, don't you guys?—Guys!

I was a purveyor of paradise as a teenager. I was an aficionado of Armageddon. I would go door to door selling God's 'New System'—a literal governmental intervention from Heaven that would soon sweep away the present global problems and replace them with 'Heaven on Earth'. This 'Kingdom' had already begun its invisible rule in 1914 and I was lucky to be a baptised citizen of the 'Theocracy' living in the 'Last Days'. One of the ancient tribal gods of the Middle East, Jehovah, was my shield in daily life and my armour for the anticipated cataclysm. Even though Armageddon was going to be a trying time, I was confident I was going to dodge every fiery meteorite, leap over every widening abyss and bypass all eruptions of sulphur on the 'Final Day'. I had cups of tea with elderly ladies in their cottage gardens; I told them how to live their lives in order for them to make it too. I walked unfalteringly up to front doors past cars set up on blocks in high grass and over oily driveways strewn with Harley Davidsons. In front of ripped flyscreens, I squeaked out spiritual survival strategies in my breaking voice to the bearded, tattooed and smacked-out. No one missed out on his or her opportunity to hear the 'Good News'. I had ready comebacks to 'I'm not interested'; I had post-it notes in my zippered bible. The pleats in my cheap suit pants helped me plough through general apathy and my two-dollar-shop neckties held my head erect. Doors may have slammed in my face but the door to the Ark was still wide open (for those willing to make the required changes).

In the coming paradisiacal Earth, no one would grow old, get sick or die, I cheerfully informed my neighbours. The millions who had died before the foretold Judgement would come back to life shortly after Armageddon in 'The Resurrection'. They too would live forever as flesh-and-blood beings on—if the pictures in our magazines were anything to go by—planet Earth transformed into a giant, landscaped golf course. All needs would be met. No one would be hungry, there would never be any conflict and nothing sad would ever happen. Carnivores and herbivores would get along (which was a comfort when the then current reality included navigating past Rottweilers to make it to some doors). We, the survivors and the resurrected ones, most likely would be naked, speak Hebrew and be vegetarian but this was considered conjecture as the Bible could not confirm it and only made the congregation squirm a bit when brought up. So that prospective survivors wouldn't be swept away with the degenerate, 'worldly' people, no true Christian wasted his or her time studying anything useful for the great rebuilding project due to start after 'God's War'. This would have taken us away from our obligation to preach and filled our heads with the whisperings of Satan. None of my friends studied engineering or science (let alone art). As the End was 'coming any day now' there was, obviously, no use studying medicine for six years only to have your profession made redundant by the Almighty half way through your degree. Window washing, kitchen-hand work, labouring and menial office jobs were OK. The meek would inherit the Earth.

I had decided to be a full-time preacher when I left school. This was a step above the required door-to-door preaching that all Jehovah's Witnesses were required to do on a monthly basis but was not financially supported by the 'Organisation' as missionaries were. Missionaries got sent to butterfly-filled islands; I got to plod the streets of Frankston and the roads along asparagus fields and hobby farms in the mudflats of Western Port Bay. Six million others of my 'brothers' and 'sisters' brought 'The Truth' to over one hundred lands in printed material published in two hundred and twenty five languages. During the late 90's, when I was channelling my hormones into this street-walking endeavour, the magazines I was carrying were being pumped out bimonthly at a staggering eighteen million copies per edition. The Watchtower, Bible and Tract Society (a.k.a. Jehovah's Witnesses) made the Guinness Book of Records. We brought virgin rainforests back to the Guugu Yimithirr, Tutsis and Solomon Islanders in stapled-together, thin slices. We brought pictures of hibiscuses and coconuts to the Saami, Samoyed and Inuit on pulped and rolled out birch.

Whilst slowly walking the suburbs and rural back roads, in and out of people's

private spaces, I felt an uncanny bliss. I carried small, laminated maps of the street blocks the congregation elders had prepared as I entered every nook and cranny within a ten-kilometre radius of my home. Not many have been lucky enough to experience their neighbourhood so thoroughly (permissible trespass must be every teenage boy's dream). As a 'Kingdom Worker' I didn't just traverse the environment, I transcended it. I had it in abstract form in my pocket and mind and I saw and felt it intimately at ground level. I would eventually return to the same houses with new magazines with the same old story. With no apparent personal ambition other than to serve and no registered major thoughts of my own, I felt a holy resignation. God lifted the corners of my mouth in a perpetual, Mona Lisa-like smile, seemingly, with no strings attached. I unabashedly cocked my leg for Him on every tree and fencepost whenever his Son took me for our walks. In the silences between each door visit and when the gentle sun shone, the purple bougainvilleas entwined on the verandahs of the bogan villas actually were moving to approach and be enveloped by. The roses did smell sweet because I did stop to literally smell them along carports and in front of patio pots. The alpacas, poodles, and budgies that greeted my visits could only cheer me and induce wonder at the majesty and diversity of life with their banter and nudging. There were precious moments of joy and exploration before each doorbell was rung that I'm sure no householder ever suspected. No matter how hard the rejection, I could see New Eden already germinating wherever and whenever I took the time to meander the dirty, disappointing streets of the world (which I would do anywhere from two to nine hours a day).

As for the Fall, do I need to go into the details of my Armageddon—the door slam of all door slams? Should I tell you how the strangling vines of the flesh eventually took over Paradise? Do I have to point to the chameleons, funnel-web spiders and moist-eyed pythons that were always in the trees? I could narrate bloody and tiresome stories of who-doesn't-speak-to-whom anymore. I could tell you what I did with my body—about the cosmic orgasm that ruptured time and space, if you care to know. I could let you in on the teary-eyed fear of a pimply, homeless boy. However, I am beginning to get slightly tired of retelling this story of late. How do I even insert myself into a narrative of punctured skies and blown-to-bits expectations without evoking myths of heroism? Let me tell you the riveting story of the ant and the rainstorm and how he made it to shelter instead. I don't need to insert my name, the name of my estranged mother and father, my siblings and congregational elders who passed binding judgement and my friends who disappeared in my anti-Rapture. Running away from home late at night through the streets that I once preached on, scurrying over the splitting ground and fallen limbs, I made it to safety.

I've known Paradise and I've seen the dark back of Deity. I know Paradise and I know Pompeii. This process does not stop—not here in Byron Bay nor will it end on my return to Melbourne. I am good at it. I can make the world disappear and reappear every time I shut and open my eyes. It is a metanarrative that may not ever fully be neutralised. My life is mapped out so, above and below—the Eternal Return, the Apocatastasis.

The End (The Beginning).

I was sitting on a park bench with my baggage in the half hour before the mini-bus came to take me back to the airport when a very uncanny event took place. I had written the above text a number of days before but my contemplation remained with me through my swimming and forest walks. However, I felt very relaxed and at ease with life by this stage—the usual effect of a week in the subtropics.

I looked up from my reverie of decision making about possible last minute gift purchases to find a scrawny, old man in a white shirt, pleated pants and fit-over sunglasses standing two centimetres too close to me in a hovering position. He smiled gently. He talked to me yet I don't remember a particular beginning to that conversation. He leapt straight into the heart of his stories. He told me of local young men in Lismore who are just getting fat looking at porn and living off benefits. He told me of the young Arab men who go crazy over here when they see women with hardly anything on. He spoke of blueberry picking season and the young Japanese guy in town who he was trying to secure a job for, but who could only speak 'so much English'. He squeezed his thumb and finger together, stopping an inch apart, as he explained. He let me know how hard it was for him to sell his farm and how cold it had been the other night. I glanced at his slim-line, vinyl briefcase, his polished business shoes and weather-beaten but cleanly shaved face. My bones were picking up on the tune strongly; the old anthem was building momentum. I knew who this guy was. I had seen him a thousand times growing up, yet I still wanted to believe, somehow, that he was just an unbalanced and talkative lonely farmer in town for business. His lack of necktie threw me, and then I remembered the special dispensation for preachers in hot climates. I could never get away with not wearing a tie door-to-door, even on forty-degree days. Victoria was not mapped out as a hot place.

'Anyway, great talking to you', he said. I had barely gotten a word in. Then came the punch line: 'Would you like something spiritual to read?' he asked. How sly to use that word in a town like this! I thought. What a suave technique, my brother. 'Yes, yes I would!' I said enthusiastically. I observed his face, his eyes glinted and his smile wrinkled his features further.

'Let me see, I have them in so many languages that I sometimes can't find the English ones'. He pulled out an array of Watchtower and Awake magazines.

'How about this one? Have you heard of Armageddon?' He didn't bother to look too closely at the cover. 'ARMAGEDDON War is Her? Wannere Komt Her?' it proclaimed in Dutch with the international grammar of fear.

'OK', I said cheerfully, as thrills coursed through my body. (I am so glad I didn't get into hallucinogens in Byron because I think I may have been sitting on a space-time wormhole). I didn't tell him my story or that I had been collecting the Watchtower and Awake magazines left at my local laundromat and, therefore, already had that particular copy in English. I didn't tell him I was intending to pulp them and make papier mâché sculptures in gleeful, childish and subtle ways.

'Thank you', I said and got up to gather my bags to catch the bus. 'You have a lovely day and good luck selling your farm'.

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