

# THE RADIATION SICKNESS OF THE SOUL

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**IF POSTMODERNISM IS A PHILOSOPHY OF RELATIVISM, AND IF EINSTEIN SHOWED US THAT EVERYTHING IS ONLY RELATIVE TO THE ABSOLUTE SPEED OF LIGHT, THEN THAT LIGHT, AND POSTMODERNISM ITSELF, DECLARED ITS NERVOUS AND RADIOACTIVE ARRIVAL AT THE ROASTED EDGES OF HIROSHIMA'S EPICENTRE ON 6 AUGUST 1945.** Its half-life ended when a different kind of Manhattan Project was completed on 11 September 2001 (9/11). Be wary of the idealistic slogans that confer moral favour on one form of destruction over another, because the simple etymological fact is that Harry Truman's decision was the real beginning of any modern understanding of the word *terrorism*. Even William Faulkner, in his 1949 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, acknowledged that fear and loneliness (and imminent death) were the primary characteristics of the human condition after World War II.

Roughly three post-War generations of humanity have witnessed postmodernism's brief day as the reigning aesthetic, philosophy, morality, and architectural style. It was novel, fun, and exhausting. Each has passed on its highest moral principle, wittingly or not, to its kin. For our grandparents the highest moral principle was biological survival, thus the immediate post-nuclear rise of existentialism, the philosophy concerned with the most basic thing – existence. They led quietly consistent lives that bored the tears out of our parents who, feeling trapped by the rules and regulations required for mere existence in what turned out to be a ridiculously opulent post-war culture, opted for revolution, which usually meant at the very least sexual liberation from the perceived confines of heterosexuality, monogamy, and female biology, all of which could be either ignored or forestalled thanks to the reordering of our desires through mass media and the fulfilment of those desires via technology. Ironically, technology's rapid growth was largely a by-product of the West's drive to survive in a global nuclear environment.

My generation grew up in a moral vacuum, and we have abhorred it.

With divorced, gay, alcoholic or anaesthetised parents, multiple step-siblings, single-parent homes, double-parent incomes and zero-parent nannies, we grew up wondering why the world was in such a chaotic state in the first place. Did things really have to be this bad? We click on the Internet, direct descendant of the nuclear age wartime communications system and blood brother of the highway system (a massive infrastructure leased to the citizenry in times of peace

that are silently times of permanent war), and we search for clues as to how the mess started, who's responsible, and how we can get out of it. Finding no answers, we spend 70–80 per cent of our online time downloading pornography. Raised fatherless, we take comfort in the illusion of women who love us. We know it's an illusion, and we make fun of it, but in a world where our fathers failed us, what other illusions are there? And since our fathers were our models for God, we feel fairly certain that God himself isn't going to show up, though the number of us returning to church is surprising.<sup>1</sup> This unexpected yet rapidly metastasising desire for metaphysical reality is a consequence of that same spiritual fatherlessness that essentially summarises all of our generation's favourite novels and films, from Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, from Pink Floyd's *The Wall* to *American Beauty*, *American Psycho*, and *American Pie*.

"The breakdown of the family as the basic building block of society" is often wrongly ascribed to this same post-War period, when mothers left the home to enter the workforce. The reality is just the opposite: the breakdown began when dad left the home, right as the industrial revolution created the megalopolis and introduced us to electronic culture. One of dad's first problems in adjusting to city life was to compensate for his sudden alienation with alcohol, which gave rise to a temperance movement driven largely by concerned mothers and wives. But prohibition started a cultural trend in morality that has become as predictable as it is depressing in contemporary culture: the treatment of the symptom at the expense of the problem. The unacknowledged relationship between technology and morality, over which we exhibit neither awareness nor control, leads to periodic moral revolts in matters that are neither essential to morality nor to salvation.

We're all going to die, and in an era of nuclear terrorism the increasingly likelihood is that it will come by violent means, yet in the face of such ubiquitous calamity, we erect postures of concern against the very things that give many the comfort they need to face their fears. Tens of thousands will die on our roads this year. We blame drunk driving, poor street signs, seat belts, air bags, underage drivers, weather conditions, *anything* but the internal combustion engine itself. According to the experts, the increased suicide rate has become something of a "crisis", but of course suicide is merely an acceleration of the existing cultural death wish, articulated perfectly by James Dean's prophetic quote, "Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking

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corpse.” Or to paraphrase Walker Percy, if you’re not depressed by modern life, you probably really are deranged. But dead or alive, good-looking corpses are all around, ghosts inhabiting the machines of their perfectly sculpted, tanned and sterile bodies.

And yet, if you really want to see the emerging morality in action, you have to visit its origins in the homeland of either its creators or its victims: Manhattan or Tokyo. In New York City, where I teach a fresh batch of increasingly detached students each semester, the reigning morality oscillates at light speed between the worldview expressed by “It’s all good!” and “Whatever!” Both are exclamations that indicate a profound confusion, and evidence of what Jedediah Purdy calls “a pre-emptive despair”. My students seem to arrive already at morally exhausted mid-life crises, having had no childhood whatsoever.<sup>2</sup> Do we miss childhood? We crave it. We want to feel like little kids again. We implicitly know that the future sucks, which is why everything new is old again, from graphic design to cars to cinema prequels and re-releases, to beer labels to antique lust. We want to be not only individually younger, we want to be culturally younger, which is why we comfort ourselves with the aesthetic remnants of our grandparents’ lives.

Postmodernism helped us create a new literary genre – science fiction – as a coping mechanism, and the only way to allegorise and understand the insanity of the current situation. Yet, according to Princess Mononoke animator Hayao Miyazaki, “If you came to Tokyo, I could show you places much more alarming than anything in *Blade Runner*.” How alarming? How about the used underwear of seventh grade girls for sale in public vending machines? According to a Japanese student of mine, “It’s a good job, my friends did it. It’s easy too, you just wear the underwear for two days straight and then mail them in to the company.” As if to prove all of it true, the latest in fiendishly demonic sci-fi is adult japanime cartoons, adult sexual content packaged in the format of children’s media, indulging the dual fantasy of a physical and sexual world of unlimited desire with no consequence.

“It’s all good!” seems to be a substitute for saying “Can’t we agree to avoid moral judgements?” and is usually uttered just before a dispute starts. It’s as though the kids saying this have heard their parents lie to them too many times about monsters, or the tooth fairy, or the Middle East, or death itself and, realising the lie, have simultaneously realised that the lie is the

only comfort available, since not even their parents can reliably enlighten them on any of these subjects. Of course, it is not all good. We know it, they know it, but the only recourse available after this posture is exhausted is to exclaim “Whatever!”, which is shorthand for saying, “I have no idea how this started, no idea how to solve it, but I’m nearly certain that it would take more time, effort, and courage than I could possibly muster in this or any lifetime.” This answer is given by students whether they can’t answer a particular academic question or whether they get into a casual difference of opinion with a classmate. It’s an attitude that makes class time a continual effort in switching channels, tuning into one topic for eight minutes and then giving them their psychically programmed need for a commercial break before switching to a new channel altogether. The problem is, all channels are MTV now in their cut and editing pace, and so it is impossible for even the most manic of teachers to keep up with their need to be entertained.

And, of course, to today’s college freshman “It’s all good” and “Whatever” are flip sides of the same coin that was minted back when they were adolescents watching Disney’s 1994 animated cartoon turned global franchising opportunity, *The Lion King*. It’s a simulacrum of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, keeping the semiotic signifier of the lion, but dismissing the significance of the message and replacing it with Timon the Meerkat’s cry of “hakuna matata”, the philosophy of “no worries”. Prior to 9/11, living in the bubble of the world’s only superpower, it was pretty easy to enjoy the benefits of this straight power concept. Now the noticeable thing is the concerted effort to collectively pretend that the bubble hasn’t burst.

Despite the perversity all around us, the end of postmodernism is, on closer inspection, a world of a miniaturised hyper-morality. Thanks to the eroded moral exoskeleton that formerly provided a common narrative to relate to or deviate from, we are now each responsible for proving the morality of our own actions. And proving our own righteousness has become the only straight power concept left. So heavy is the burden of responsibility for our own moral authority, that none of us has any rest. “Whatever” is what we all wish we could say with authority, but can’t, so we repeat it as if mere repetition could make it true.

The history of the twentieth century is, in many ways, the history of these moral paradigm shifts. To our grandparents one man, Christ, was responsible for the

#### NOTES

1 See Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy*.

2 This sociological fact is confirmed by Neil Postman’s *Disappearance of Childhood*, which he credits to the 1950’s rise of television as a mass medium that dispersed all adult (i.e., sexual) secrets to children.

3 This is why Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs McWorld* so accurately sums up the current global culture problem while his solution of “more democracy” merely seems to miss the point of his own analysis.

We passionately believe that it is possible to change current attitudes towards the Bible

► righteousness of many. To our parents, the last practitioners of modernity, you got your righteousness from membership in some ideology like democracy or socialism, which usually had a social core of Christian values while delicately discarding the offensive centrality of Christ.<sup>3</sup> To our postmodern generation, whose postmodern morality ended as officially as irony did on 9/11, the current view is a philosopher's Titanic: everyone for themselves. We keep scanning the horizon for lifeboats, but all we see are more aeroplanes heading to their questionable destinations.

The original prophets of electronic culture – Freud, Darwin and Marx – have now been followed all the way through to their logical conclusions. Where our grandparents just wanted to survive, and our parents wanted to maximise pleasure, my generation simply wants to minimise pain by having the fittest body and the largest bank account possible. Thus, we are the legatees of a very detached, clinical, medical morality that sees health as the chief and highest end of man and uses pharmaceutical metaphors in everything from its advertising (Reebok shoes “prescribed for champion athletes”; Nissan is “The cure for the common car”) to greeting cards that wish us *a safe and healthy winter vacation* instead of a joyous holiday or – God forbid – a merry Christmas. Instead of a joyous holiday or a merry Christmas. Thus, we have inherited all of our parent's symptoms and conveniently converted them into full-blown diseases. Panic attacks, anxiety disorder and depression are the new diseases for which the pharmaceutical industry has a cure, the only market (other than military hardware) to see a growth in sales after 9/11. Once the domain of grizzled Vietnam veterans, post-traumatic stress disorder is now an equal opportunity syndrome. We take Viagra to counteract the loss of libido caused by Prozac, and drink Diet Pepsi so we can continue to live up to the strong, beautiful Nazi ideals of those who think young.

We are, in short, completely numb. Sjogren's syndrome, in which the sufferer cannot produce tears, is now a culture-wide malaise. Students of mine were sick and tired of discussing 9/11 by the following week. It was, in effect, a movie of the week. Physically, we were only fifteen blocks north of ground zero, but psychologically, even that proximity was too far from the roasted edges to be understood as reality.

And the truth? That's a Calvin Klein perfume, a Budweiser campaign (“True”), a Levi's jeans jingle (“What's True?”), and a website (thetruth.com)

dedicated to the biggest of social sins, the moral health hazard of smoking. Our life is a breakfast cereal, a weekly magazine, or a bored game.

Whatever comes after postmodernism couldn't possibly be worse. Or could it? Is there a death-wishing culture more death-like than this current trance? At a certain point, even media guru and devout believer Marshall McLuhan muttered, “Our only hope is Apocalypse.”

Pastors, ministers, priests, counsellors, therapists, and physicians of the soul, heal us.