8.15.04

The Way We Live Now

MAGNUM PHOTOS

Terror-Filled

Preparing for the worst by never ceasing to think about it.

By Daphne Merkin

"How much weight can a brute reference carry?" the philosopher Susan Neiman asks in her book "Evil in Modern Thought." "It takes no more than the name of a place to mean: the collapse of the most basic trust in the world, the grounds that make civilization possible." The 1775 earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon was generally perceived to be the most shocking event to hit Western civilization since the fall of Rome, igniting a debate about natural versus moral evil that shook up European thought. After that came Auschwitz, which left irreparable conceptual damage about the very nature of the human in its wake. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, Neiman notes, "compared it to an earthquake that destroys not only lives and buildings but also the instruments used to measure the earthquake itself." And then there was Hiroshima, which ushered in the devastation of atomic warfare and led William Faulkner to make a crushingly fatalistic declaration in his 1950 Novel Prize acceptance: "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: when will I be blown up?"

For many of us, I would suggest the brute reference of our historical moment is 9/11. We all know in a second what that signifies — a dazzlingly clear day and then the cataclysm that no one had envisioned because our anticipation of the future depends to some degree on our familiarity with the past, and there was no precedent for this particular conjunction of sophisticated know-how and primitive zealotry. At the time it was said that the deaths on 9/11 changed everything; in truth, the world, as it is wont to do, picked itself up, dusted itself off and went on its imperturbable way.

Of course, living under the sign of terror in one form or another is not unique to our age. But 9/11 and the subsequent terrorist alerts — the latest, and perhaps the most alarming, broadcast two weeks ago — have created a renewed comprehension of the fact that progress, as the free world conceives it, is never simply progress, a self-evident leap forward. We have seen stark evidence that there are people who hate us in part for our advanced lifestyle, and that their animus can be as nurturing an impulse as good will.

So what does one do in the face of the prospect of another Jihadist attack? One eminently practical man I know, a psychiatrist with excellent connections in Washington, told me recently that he doesn't give the matter a second thought, not even on his twice-a-day treks through Grand Central. Others of us, however, have responded to the events of 9/11 by developing what I would call a catastrophic style of thinking. It

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SUM OF ALL FEARS

Two months after 9/11, 973 Americans were asked to estimate the probability that within the next year they, as well as the average American, would experience risky events and take precautionary actions. Probabilities are expressed in percentage terms.

	Self	Average American
Be hurt in a terror attack	10	50
Have trouble sleeping because of the situation with terror	10	45
Travel less than usual	20	50
Screen mail carefully for suspicious items	50	60
Get the flu	50	50
Be the victim of violent crime (other than terror)	10	40
Die from any cause (crime, illness, accident)	25	50

Source: Effects of Fear and Anger on Perceived Risks of Terrorism, J. Lerner et al., Psychological Science, March 2003

manifests itself in an obsession with gathering information in an effort to know the worst and thereby master our rising panic. To this end we have been glued to the Internet throughout this long hot summer of beheadings and terrorist scares, checking out Web sites with names likes Blogs of War, Jihad Watch and Above Top Secret. The reliability of the data is impossible to ascertain, although some of it eventually trickles down and appears in reputable papers like this one. We share our knowledge with one another like a secret society, an on-the-ground intelligence unit within your unwitting midst, discussing the horrific details — the likely dates, the probable number of casualties given a suitcase bomb over, say, a hydrogen bomb — with an odd kind of gallows-humor equanimity over a pasta dinner.

We are, depending on your point of view, incorrigible doomsayers from way back or bravely staring into the abyss while others avert their gaze. I would argue that our intellectual curiosity points to a particular kind of psychological organization, one that is long on apprehensive imagination and short on defensive filters. By which I mean that it is not so much a personal choice as a matter of temperament: call it the curse of having thinner nerve endings. I'm sure it is possible to psychoanalyze the origins of this propensity all the way back to the womb — to early trauma, fears of abandonment, fear of change, excessive amounts of ready-at-hand guilt (i.e., the sense that we all have it coming one way or another), a susceptibility to depression or anxiety. But I'm disinclined to think the answer lies exclusively with Freud — who, by the way, was an ardent pessimist, and I suspect would be on the short list to receive the latest posting if he were alive today.

Yet unlike some of my friends, I haven't made any contingency plans for a fast getaway. On a visceral level, I don't know how much I want to survive in a world without the people I love around me. I keep flashing on a "Night of the Living Dead" scenario, in which I stagger around Central Park with my skin peeling off, looking for my daughter in the rubble. By contrast, my friend Eve, who is the most obsessive member of our reconnaissance team, has what I call a Catastrophe Kit at the ready: her JanSport knapsack is fitted out with cash, a battery-operated radio, a flashlight, toilet paper, bottled water, respiration masks and medication. I suggested to her, somewhat ghoulishly, that we should market these kits, customizing them to individual specifications.

I'm not sure, when it comes right down to it, that I wouldn't prefer to be the sort of person who refuses to mull over worst-case possibilities, nor am I implying that being in a state of high alert serves greater mankind. We are, Eve and others like us, self-elected miner's canaries, sniffing out the odorless gas before it kills, convinced that a state of vigilance is an enlightened rather than paranoid response and that the only way to engage with a dark and unfathomable surrounding is by being on constant Code Red. I will remain tuned in because I need to be, because the selective fatalism that is necessary to getting up in the morning — the "not now, not yet, not here" approach — doesn't always work. Meanwhile, I continue to do as I have always done: making appointments, going for a haircut, visiting the dentist. As I see it, the situation is dire but not fatal — at least for the duration. ■