



February 2021

2021-5

## Coping with Chaos

The purpose of these special Solicitudes is to share with you our states of mind, our coping mechanisms and our path through this past year. For me it has just seemed that the chaos will never stop!!! I have largely given up watching TV news programs. Rachael and Anderson will have to go on without me for a while! Although I do keep Judy Woodruff and the PBS News hour on my radar for a calm and measured response to the day's mayhem, I have largely stopped watching the daily news, which isn't really news at all, but a regurgitation of episodes of violence and half-truths that do nothing for my soul. I was doing pretty well with that discipline until this week when I was drawn into the horrifying and graphic replays of the Insurrection on Epiphany (January 6), 2021 at the Senate Impeachment trial. It was heartbreaking to watch the willful destruction and rampaging glee that was captured on that footage. People laughing as they ransacked the private desks of Senators, joyfully breaking windows, and playfully calling out their intended targets. (Oh, Nancy...where are you?) So much was horrible on those tapes, but what struck me most was the fact that there was such random violence, destroying everything just for the heck of it. And I immediately thought of one of the most graphic and haunting poems that have seemed to find its way into my thoughts these past few months. Written in 1919, this poem describes the world of Post-World War 1 Europe, as W. B. Yeats saw it. Almost exactly one hundred years ago this prophetic writing seems to capture our present moment:

### The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
*The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That Twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

What does this mysterious poem mean for us a century later when once again “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”? Who are the “best” who lack all conviction and who are the “worst” that are full of passionate intensity? What is the “vast image of Spiritus Mundi”? How prophetic is this poem for us today and what can we learn from its words and references?

Surely, we can see that the center is not holding. The vast majority of us, although many are “church going Christians”, seem to have no moral center, nor the ability to screen the facts from bald faced lies, and posture using the common good for their personal advantage. And round and round we go, until dizzy and nauseated. We are seeing things falling apart right and left! Belief in a democratically elected government! The fundamental rights of all people! The understanding of basic goodness and compassion! Where is our holding of the Soul of the World, the *Spiritus Mundi* that has become our national heritage and responsibility?

Reflecting back on this unsettling year of 2020, I have often thought of how I am keeping my center. What has worked for me to keep me from screaming into the night? Where have I found the strength to meet each day and not find it awful and overwhelming?

I think that I have things that I could share:

1. Daily meditation—At the beginning of the Pandemic I dusted off my meditation practice, which had been left on the shelf for the past couple of years. I found that this time alone with just me, my prayers, my concerns, worries and anger has been extremely helpful. I can sit with the demons, stare them down, find strength to continue, and find deep peace. I have also found many useful meditation tools that I did not know were available. These I will be sharing at the Gathering.
2. Activism—This is not everyone’s cup of tea, but for me it has been empowering. There is so much that can be done on the internet—contacting representatives and senators at the state and federal levels, responding to online petitions (which I have been assured make a difference), and participating in Zoom calls with other like-minded people. I have written letters to the editor, which is a great way to let off steam and an easy process to do online. Some have even been published. It is important to take every opportunity to speak truth to power. Now it is easier than ever.
3. Sharing—When I look around my community, I have seen needs that I can meet everywhere: homemade soup to a neighbor recently diagnosed with cancer or to a 97-

- year-old shut-in, donations and supplies to the local homeless shelter and food bank; cookies and bread fresh from the oven to bring delight to a friend. Doing this takes away some of the anxiety and frustration that has been so prevalent in the atmosphere this past year.
4. Listening—How hard it is to listen when my passion wants to scream and argue. It has been a goal of this year to take a breath and be totally present to pain, anger, frustration and deep sadness of others. (This is particularly hard for an Enneagram 7, as my first reaction is to flee the feeling of pain and to seek distraction and diversion.) Being a listener is what the world needs now---there are too many people who think that they can fix it.
  5. Opening myself to the freedom of not clinging in openness and surrender—I have practiced not letting things get emotionally stuck in my ego—stepping away and stepping into a new place of peace and calm, where real love and compassion can happen
  6. Listening to classical music—Again, this is not everyone’s genre, but for me to get lost in the interplay of sounds and voices in a symphonic concert is a tremendous stress reliever.
  7. Finding refuge in poetry—Although I love it, I don’t regularly read poetry, but this past year I have found that it has given words to so much that I am feeling. Like the W. B. Yeats poem, many others say with beautiful words and stirring metaphors things that I am blocked on—and allow the weeping of my heart to find healing and understanding.
  8. Finding beauty in relationships--maybe because our relationships have been so curtailed this year, I have learned to value new or forgotten ways to keep in touch: a handwritten note (Mom would be so happy), a phone call, a text or an email. This is where a loaf of bread or a plate of cookies can be a bonding gesture.

My expanded relationship with poetry has brought me deep insight. I will share this with you from John of the Cross, who also wrote one of my favorites “If a virgin should come walking...” It is a bit long, but here are a few stanzas:

Stanzas Concerning an Ecstasy Experienced in High  
Contemplation

I entered into unknowing,  
And there I remained unknowing  
Transcending all knowledge.

...

That perfect knowledge  
Was of peace and holiness  
Held at no remove  
In profound solitude;  
It was something so secret  
That I was left stammering  
Transcending all knowledge.

...

He who truly arrives there  
Cuts free from himself;

All that he knew before  
Now seems worthless,  
And his knowledge so soars  
That he is left in unknowing  
Transcending all knowledge.

...

This knowledge in unknowing  
Is so overwhelming  
That wise men disputing  
Can never overthrow it,  
For their knowledge does not reach  
To the understanding of not  
Understanding,  
Transcending all knowledge.'

And this supreme knowledge  
Is so exalted  
That no power of man or learning  
Can grasp it;  
He who masters himself  
Will, with knowledge in unknowing,  
Always be transcending.

And if you should want to hear  
This highest knowledge lies  
In the loftiest sense  
Of the essence of God;  
This is a work of his mercy,  
To leave one without understanding,  
Transcending all knowledge.

Abbot Lynn said in his reflection that we need inward stability, and we need wisdom and inner resilience that comes from our experience of the vertical axis. He suggests that this is time for listening deeply and responding with clarity. We can only do that when our own hearts are clear and calm. I now invite you to go deep into your soul and cultivate this clarity and peace.

As my meditation teachers would say, "Shanti, shanti, shanti--peace, rest, calmness and tranquility be yours.

~~ Abbot Ann Johnson