

## Doomsday Echoes

I didn't know that body memories of fear could last so long until one night in November 1983 when I watched the TV film *The Day After* in which a conflict starting in Eastern Europe escalated into a nuclear war. Mine was a whole-person reaction, spirit and body, a sense of shock yes, but also a tightening of muscles, a queasy stomach, a coldness in the throat, a slight clamminess of the skin. Born in 1951, I had done my share of drills in preparation for an "atomic bomb" attack, running in from the street to lie on the floor, squatting under a school desk until the exercise was over. I worried about how safe our family's cellar would be as I regularly heard recommendations for building bomb shelters. There were air raid sirens that would go off now and then as they conducted tests of the warning systems, with pretty much the same sound as I heard in *The Day After*.

What came to be known as the Baby Boomer generation grew up with the constant awareness that they could be instantly annihilated. The images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from August 1945 remained frightening, and the succession of events starting from the Soviet Union's detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949 through Nikita Khrushchev's declaration that "we will bury you," in 1956, the same year in which the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, to the frightening standoff of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 built a balance of terror between the two nuclear world powers and a chronic anxiety that I believe had a profound and lasting effect for those who came of age during that time. The present generation will have a similar experience due to the specter of climate change.

Growing up with the prospect of instant and senseless death on a mass scale can have various and even opposite effects. It could lead to acts of faith, placing one's own fate and that of mankind in the hands of a divinity that may have more power than the fractured atom. Or it could lead to a deep skepticism, questioning the permanence or reliability of institutions, social organization, long-held beliefs, and commonly accepted truths. It could cause people to possess a deep respect and care for human life, or it could make people regard others as completely disposable. Sensing the fragility of life, some may dedicate themselves to lives of self-sacrifice and love while others would choose selfishness and pleasure no matter how fleeting. There may arise people with courage and hope enough to work for a promising future, but there may be others who live only in the short-term because "what's the use?" In my lifetime I have seen all these scenarios enacted, and time could be spent identifying examples of the wide spectrum of consequences of a generation living under a nuclear sword of Damocles.

With the events unfolding in the Ukraine we are unwillingly placed into the opening scenes of *The Day After* but before the first plot point. Talk of World War III and the possibility of a nuclear conflict awakens in Boomers a dread that was buried for years, but not deeply enough it seems. Just as in the formative years of the atomic generation with death as a constant companion, we again arrive at an existential juncture in the road of life – all of us, not just the Boomers. In the naked encounter with death – without the denial we use each day to live as if we were eternal, or the devices of philosophy and

religion, or the pretenses afforded by the easy distractions with which we fill our days – we are left with our raw freedom, a freedom that demands we choose how we will create meaning in an absurd world. This is, of course, the central task of existentialism, a school of philosophy that blossomed in the post-WWII atomic era. As was the case in the past several decades, there are different and even opposite outcomes as to how people use their freedom.

How we use our freedom to impose meaning on our worlds matters beyond us, and even affects the conflict in Ukraine. As we witness in that country the emergence of long-standing hatreds, disregard of innocent human life, the advance of power without counting the cost, the dehumanization of others by all parties concerned, and the limitless capacity for humans to inflict suffering on others for their own gain, we can be fooled into thinking that these forces of evil are “over there,” outside of us, and that we play no part except to decry them. The fact is, though, that the sounds of that conflict echo in our lives. Hostility, aggression, malevolence, destructive intent, disregard for others’ humanity, the impulse to despise rather than respect, to fight rather than tolerate, are evident daily in American public life and, more than likely, in our individual worlds. These sorts of attitudes and actions are not disconnected but flow together to generate a magma of evil that, in turn, erupts in so many ways and in so many places.

It is a metaphysical stretch to maintain that the billions of acts of malice perpetrated and scattered around the world are linked in such a symbiotic way that even how we conduct our grain-of-sand-on-the-beach-of-the-universe lives is consequential. I do make that speculative leap, though, because I have always believed what Paul expressed in I Corinthians 12: 12;26-27: “The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body, and so it is with Christ. . . . If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy. You then, are the body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it.” Humanity is not atomic in the sense of being billions of distinct atoms; we are organic, joined.

Whether this reality is expressed in religious language or not, for better or for worse, with good result or bad, we are connected. So, while we ought to be hoping for restoration of peace in Ukraine and offering material assistance, we need also be sure that we are not compounding harm by how we live each day.