

Where'd You Go, Nostradamus?

written by Guest Contributor | November 11, 2016



As a child, your nightmares were narrated by a terrifying bully. A larger-than-life enfant terrible whose dire predictions lorded over your days and nights. When he opened his mouth, it felt as if the very ground below you shook. And now it's happening to you all over again. And this time it's not Orson Welles.

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For what felt like one entire year of your childhood, you lived in deep, abiding terror of earthquakes. It was the mid 1980s. The big one in San Francisco, already almost a century past, the big one in LA, still years away. Oh, and you lived in New Jersey, roughly 3000 miles from the uncertainty of California.

You had no scientific evidence to support such a fear of an earthquake hitting your hometown; you don't even know where the nearest fault line was. Your New Jersey had other problems: frequent hurricanes, a terrible, if clichéd, accent, and nationally celebrated bad taste. But you didn't have earthquakes.

Still, it was a cold comfort to you. You slept with an escape plan in your mind and rosary beads in your hands. You bargained with all manner of saints the nuns at your school taught you about to buy your neighborhood just one more day without the earth falling out from under you.

Your childhood was the era of big disaster movies. You watched Steve McQueen and Paul Newman battle *The Towering Inferno*, watched Shelley Winters drown on *The Poseidon Adventure*. But you never watched Charlton Heston's *Earthquake*. That movie went unscreened, except in your head.

The source of your earthquake fear was traced to a single source: Nostradamus. Or more specifically, to a terrible movie about Nostradamus, that played incessantly on HBO in those days. It was narrated by Orson Welles, himself a cautionary tale not about natural disasters but personal ones. Asthmatic and lumbering, he was unrecognizable from the Citizen Kane stills you had seen. He had a beard and a fiery look in his eye. He scared the living shit out of you.

As HBO was fond of replaying all manner of programming in those early days of cable, you had the opportunity to scare yourself silly by watching that Nostradamus "documentary" dozens of times. There were very many awful things to be afraid of from that movie. Not the least of which was the promise of a third world war which would wipe out most of the population of earth. But much in the way you preferred Wish Bear to Tenderheart (that is to say, for arbitrary and slightly pastel-related reasons), you chose earthquakes to be your disaster focal point.

And so your grade school days were filled with adrenaline stoked anticipation and grade school nights with bargains and prayers and sleepless nights.

Still the earthquake didn't come. Eventually HBO began to show other programming. Your attention began to deviate from constant visions of disaster to more appealing distractions of prepubescence. You felt at first cautiously optimistic and then, well, oddly victorious. As if you had willed away a natural disaster just by worrying it to smithereens.

You're pretty sure therapists could find very many things wrong in the way you owned the responsibility for the East Coast not collapsing around your ears, but it worked for you. It helped to know that the thing you dreaded, the thing that scary Orson Welles promised you would happen, didn't.

In the end, all that worry came to a good finish. It made you feel more powerful, as if you were a survivor of the disaster that didn't strike. In the end, you won.

But now you wish someone would have told you not to get too comfortable in this role as the winner.

Because less than 20 years later, a real disaster did strike the East Coast and the same third world war that Orson Welles warned about seemed then, and still seems today, like a very real and scary possibility.

The bigger problem to you these days is that you have children. And they are close in age to when you first became paranoid and they too feel tremors in their dreams.

But their earth shattering fear doesn't come from a dismissible Orson Welles, the big man, the show man, the father of *Rosebud*, but from real life. And it is a great deal more grounded than your earthquake fear ever was. Global warming. Terrorism. Bigotry. Hatred. Mistrust. Their fears are as plentiful as yours was singular. And the realization of this breaks your heart.

Because what are you to say about these concerns? To say not to worry about them sounds not only false, but frivolous, and dangerous even. And they know it. These are the details of the reality that they live in. That you live in with them. Your kids are smart. All kids are smart these days. And they know that there are very many things to worry about. Things that will always be more real and more scary than even your scariest fears when you were their age.

You are at a loss for ways to comfort them. It occurs to you that you could

tell them about your earthquake year. Your nights spent wasted on a disaster that never came. But they can point to any number of real disasters that have come to pass that will shut your argument down.

You think that probably the days of kids worrying over what Nostradamus predictions are long over, gone the way of the Mayan calendar fatalists. (And so what if you bought a few extra bottles of water in December 2012...) But in its absence is something that scares you even more. Your kids will never likely know that Orson Welles film, but you can't very well say the same about the reality of the world they live in. And if you were as powerful as you had once imagined back in the year after you single-handedly averted disaster just by worrying the earthquake away, you would choose for your kids to have a future free of all of these fears. But if you had to strike another bargain like you did all those years ago, you'd probably pick that they have only an outdated HBO documentary to keep them awake at night. In the face of global disaster, you would probably choose Orson Welles, even at his Grisly Adams-est, to keep them awake instead any old time.

So maybe this weekend you'll look for this old Nostradamus documentary on Netflix and maybe you'll make popcorn. Maybe you'll tempt fate by forcing your kids to watch it. And maybe you'll bust out the prayer vigil again too. Because, hey it didn't hurt the first time around. And, at the very least on the couch, with an arm around your children, you will be reminded that you're still here. That they're still here. That the world is still here.

Some days you are convinced that giving Orson Welles to your kids is the only way forward for all of you in this scary existence. Maybe you are willing to show them the things that once terrified you in the hopes that they laugh. Their fears are bigger and you are not afraid to be their clown. Although part of you still worries that maybe Orson will scare them too. That they will have a hard time sleeping at night. That the glare of Orson's eyes will bore into their souls the way they bored into yours. Maybe if he scares them sleepless, you won't have to answer questions of a more grounded nature. Maybe Orson will distract them and save you from the uncomfortable conversations about the world you share.

But then again, maybe not. You're not sure, after all, if you have it in you to revisit Orson and the deranged monk look of him in that film, his eyes burning with knowledge of something you still haven't figured out, all these years later. You know, after all, that you've seen those eyes before. And it occurs to you that they are the same eyes of the saints the nuns taught to you in school, burning fever-bright with vision from the pages of your religion books. The eyes of Saint Benedict, in particular, on the hills of Norcia, Italy, long before it was destroyed by, what else? An earthquake.



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