

“Balance in an Unbalanced Age”  
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
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## Introduction

The phrase “waiting for the other shoe to drop” originated in the nineteenth century in badly built New York City tenement buildings. The floors stacked up, all of them wood. When tired workers came home at night, they slowly removed their heavy work boots, dropping each in turn on the wooden floor. Which neighbors—up down and all around—heard.

An exhausted worker might wait some time between removing that first boot and getting around to removing the second. However long it took, the neighbors waited for the thud to occur.

The phrase has come down to us today signifying waiting . . . with a certain amount of dread.

Waiting for the other shoe to drop is natural to human beings. After all, we learn early about cause and effect. We drop something, it falls. Cause and effect is a great thing to learn about. Waiting for the other shoe to drop, however, has to do with catastrophizing. Expecting the worse. Which can be self-defeating. And self-fulfilling. There’s a vast difference between realism and pessimism. There’s a vast difference between vigilance and anxiety.

As Mark Twain expressed worry and anxiety, “Some of the worst things in my life never even happened.”

Rather than waiting for the other shoe to drop—the next bad thing to happen—we can choose to work for the next thing to be good rather than ill. Our efforts often may seem for naught, but as the twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said,

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. (*The Irony of American History*)

## ONE

In her poem "September, 1918," the poet Amy Lowell catches that feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop as it felt to her, with a note of optimism. The First World War ended with a peace agreement in November of 1918—two months after this poem. But Lowell couldn't have known that. Instead, she says,

For I have time for nothing  
But the endeavor to balance myself  
Upon a broken world.

Lately it's been difficult to avoid that feeling that the other shoe is going to drop. Wars. Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Repressive and irresponsible government . . . It's been difficult to "balance . . . / Upon a broken world" as Lowell put it.

A few Sundays ago I mentioned the *Book of Revelation* from Christian scripture and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—War, Death, Famine, and Pestilence. Thanks for reminding me about the novel *Good Omens* in which writers Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman update the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—Pestilence retires after the discovery of penicillin and Pollution becomes the fourth Horseman. (It should also be noted that in the novel Famine is a fast food tycoon.)

Yes, things have felt apocalyptic lately. What I want to say today is that it matters how we wait for that other shoe to drop. As poet Charles Bukowski put it,

what matters most is  
how well you  
walk through the  
fire.

## TWO

Speaking of the Apocalypse, before monotheism, the gods tended to be gods of various seasons and natural phenomena. Much as in our chant of the directions:

Look to the South: Home of winter's distant sun  
Realm of Fire and autumn's burning embers—  
Welcome the season's flaming colors

For example, the Roman god of the south wind was Auster. In Italy, the south winds of autumn bring heat and torrential rains. The Roman poet Virgil wrote,

into the grain comes the furious flames of Auster,  
and the rushing torrent drowns the fields

(Trivia for the day: "Auster" is where the word "Australia" originates—south.)

Hurricane Irma's rains reached as far north as my family farm in Illinois. One thing farmers don't want this time of year is rain, because it knocks the drying grain off the stalk, and makes getting into the fields to harvest difficult. It has always been so. And, it always will be so.

This is a cyclical view of nature and time. The south wind brings autumn. Every year. And the years circle on, just as the earth continues to wheel around the sun. In this way of seeing reality, the gods embody natural events.

Western monotheisms introduced a linear way of seeing time. The monotheistic Western gods intercede in human history at various points to develop the plot: for example, the Hebrew god intervenes in Egyptian politics to force the Egyptians to release the captive Hebrew people. This is a one-time thing, even though it's celebrated every year as Passover.

Western time is measured in before *Domini* and after *Domini*. A major, history-changing event in the minds of Christians.

One interesting aspect of the Western monotheisms is that they have end-of-the-world scenarios in which messiahs arrive to put things right, even while they embrace the older, cyclical celebrations of the agricultural year with holidays such as Passover and Rosh Hashanah and Christmas, which occur every year.

I keep saying "Western monotheisms" because Hinduism is monotheistic but cyclic: everything happens over and over and over. The high god Shiva both destroys and transforms endlessly. Nothing ever really ends. It cycles.

However, the *Book of Revelation* springs from a completely linear understanding: those Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse go for their apocalyptic ride, then the Antichrist comes to town, then Christ descends, establishes the perfect theocracy, and rules the world peacefully (in some Christian theologies, anyway).

A linear understanding—a story with a plot—beginning, middle, and end. Islam took that idea as well, and speculation on how things will end is one of the differences between Sunnis and Shiites.

Most human religions for most of human history, however, have understood time as cyclical. Day, night. The seasons. On and on.

As I mentioned during the Time for All Ages a couple of weeks ago, these traditions—Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, the shamanistic traditions, the Western pagan traditions—all see time and nature as endlessly cyclical and the human duty as adaptation to what we observe happening in the world.

These traditions see the other shoe dropping as just part of what happens—another shoe will always be dropping. Always has. Always will. Deal with it . . .

Misapplied, such a worldview can lead to passive pessimism. Wisely applied, such a worldview can lead to balance. To paraphrase Buzz Lightyear—It may not be flying, but it's falling with style.

### THREE

As I mentioned over Labor Day weekend, the September issue of the *The Atlantic* magazine includes an article by Kurt Anderson titled "How America Lost Its Mind." Anderson has released a book titled *Fantasy Land: How America Went Haywire: a Five Hundred Year History*. Our bookstore has ordered copies of this book and we will have a discussion of it.

In his article, Anderson tells of what he calls the American "promiscuous devotion to the untrue," and he surmises that "maybe a third" of Americans are "solidly reality-based." His surmise is based on polling that says two-thirds of Americans believe in angels and demons. Half believe in a personal god who is active in the universe—that classic monotheism I was talking about. And half believe in the existence of a geographic place called heaven.

Anderson writes,

. . . being American means we can believe anything we want; that our beliefs are equal or superior to anyone else's, experts be damned.

end quote.

“Reality-based” people.

That’s first and foremost us. Humanists are people who work to discover the truth first, and only later decide how we feel about it. We don’t construct our worldview based on what we *wish* were true.

It isn’t any surprise to reality-based people that no god actually “shed his grace” on the US. From a reality-based viewpoint, American exceptionalism is merely absurd. Empires rise and empires fall. That’s no surprise.

As I have said before, it is the duty of “reality-based” people to join with others to be the adults in the room.

This includes liberal Christians, and Jews, and Muslims who do not believe in the literal truth of their scriptures.

The humanist worldview requires several shifts in perspective. A major one is embracing the view that meaning and purpose are human constructs. The universe or the gods do not provide these. That’s our job.

In that reality-based world there’s a difference between hope and realistic hope. Justice and equity may not be entirely achievable in human governments and human economic systems. It may be we can only get as close as we can . . .

Furthermore, there’s a duty to see what nature and reality teaches us. Those are the lessons of the equinox—the “equal night”—balance. Things get dark. Things freeze. Things get light. Things thaw out.

As reality-based people, we must learn balance and observe the way the universe works. However we feel about how unfair it all is. Then we must work for human values and the flourishing of the earth that sustains us within the perimeters of the real.

No savior—divine or human—is coming to save us from ourselves.

Life can be brutal. But there are no gods who will intervene in the outcome of a football game; or a war; or a fatal illness.

We are on our own, and we only have each other. To paraphrase the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the miracle is not to walk on water but to have walked at all.

Sure, it might be nice if there were more. But what we see is enough.

That is the lesson of many ancient religions; it is the lesson of Humanism and Religious Naturalism: what we have is enough.

Fortunately, nature gives us direction. The *Daodejing* says,

When the way (of the creative universe) is followed,  
horses plow the fields;

when it is not followed,  
horses storm cities.

Greed is the great crime;  
wanting more is  
the great tragedy.

Know what is enough  
and find contentment. (46)

## CONCLUSION

Here's to waiting for that other shoe to drop.

The Religious Naturalist Loyal Rue said,

The most profound insight in the history of humankind is that we should seek to live in accord with reality. Indeed, living in harmony with reality may be accepted as a formal definition of wisdom.

"Living in harmony with reality." We search for and strive after personal and social change. . . a way to balance (ourselves) / Upon this broken world.

Charles Bukowski put it succinctly:

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