

# The Floating World

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As soon as I woke up I felt it was darker than usual — no light on the clock, no street lights. The power was out — but why? It was still March but there had been no ice storm, or even a thunder storm. It was unusual to have a power outage in our town, and even odder to not know why. And then I remembered something else: we were in lockdown due to a now-global pandemic. Unexplained as to its origin; its effects and duration unknown. Unheard of. Unprecedented. Curious as to how widespread the outage was, I looked at my phone — but of course, no power, no wifi. More surprising, my cell service didn't seem to be working either. Was the outage more than local? More than regional? How far did it extend? My mind began to put together recent news stories into a scenario which would explain it all: the power outage, the lockdown, the pandemic. Could it be... The Russians? The North Koreans?

Was this IT?

The end time?

The Apocalypse?

My thoughts went to the great blackout of August 2003, which shut down power to much of the Northeast and Midwest US and Ontario as well — then we had relied on the car radio for news. So I headed downstairs and toward the back door. Just as I grabbed my car keys off the counter I heard a familiar hum — the fridge — and saw the streetlights come back on. I looked at the phone still in my hand; it was exactly 6:00 a.m.

It had been a planned maintenance outage — we just hadn't received the usual advance notices. I had to laugh at myself, and the way my sleepy brain had woven together the pandemic, recent political chaos and uncertainty, and this minor disruption of technology I took for granted into a story. It wasn't the Apocalypse after all...

Or was it?

Maybe not the action movie version of Apocalypse, or the fire and brimstone image portrayed in much religious art, but in the original sense of the word:

the sense of “uncovering”,

“revealing”,

— in the sense of something which has been there all along just being brought to light —

Perhaps it was Apocalypse —

Revelation after all — but with a small “r”.

What is Revealed: The Floating World

There’s a phrase which has stuck with me ever since taking a class on Japanese art many years ago: The Floating World. This 17th-19th century style, usually woodcuts, depicts the daily life, customs, and pleasures of a decadent and privileged class within Japanese society of the time. The term Floating World suggests that the intricate web of culture, tradition, and lifestyle, and the technological and economic framework it was built on, while presenting a face of progress and stability — even permanence — was merely a froth, floating on the surface of something far deeper and more elemental. It speaks of a civilization woven by human wisdom and ingenuity to address the needs and desires of the moment, and all but unaware of the deep unseen currents and movements of history — of the natural world as well as human activity — and the Divine intention and energy driving all. To its inhabitants — or at least those who don’t look beneath it — the Floating World seems enduring, even eternal — until the seas shift and a swell breaks its surface, revealing — apocalypse — the unknowable depths beneath.

Back to that dark morning in March, 2020. Imagine: Italy — an entire country — had been locked down due to a spreading virus that had been a blip on the newsfeed just weeks before. But worse was to come — NBA basketball cancelled its season — Tom Hanks had Covid -19!

Everything that was happening was Unprecedented!

Unexplained!

Unknown!

Uncharted territory!

The way things shifted, seemingly from first to sixth gear of change threw us all into fear and uncertainty. Health care systems, economic systems, political systems, even social conventions

and cultural practices were changing overnight and all seemed at risk — nothing would be the same in the face of the Novel Corona virus.

Novel,

New,

Never before...

But of course, the Floating World of human systems has been breaking up, dispersing, and re-coalescing for millennia in a constant churn.

We are seeing: Political Disruption and resulting uncertainty, fear, dispersion of peoples, separation of families.

Is this new?

Ask the Afghans, Syrians, South Sudanese, the Rohingya who have fled or been driven from their homes in recent years. Ask the Jewish people, or indigenous peoples around the world — whose worlds have been overturned time and again through war, famine, plague, persecution.

We are seeing: Economic uncertainty, job loss, ballooning government deficits, an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor as some profit and others sink into debt.

Is this new?

Ask those who remember The Great Depression, the oil crisis of the '70s or even the economic crisis of 2008 when the tightly integrated International banking system all but collapsed completely because its foundation — its foundation — was built not on sand, like the foolish man built — but air! The airy froth of promissory notes on mortgages that could never be repaid. In other words: built on nothing at all. Bubbles. The sea foam of the Floating World.

We are seeing: The terror of a novel and seemingly uncontrollable disease; this most recent reminder that one's own body — even if healthy and backstopped by the truly wondrous benefits of modern medicine — is vulnerable to new and unknown pathogens.

— Is this new?

Ask an aged person, whose well-ordered life and health maintains a comfortable equilibrium until a small fracture or seasonal flu triggers their entire system to collapse like a house of cards and they succumb. Ask a health professional who sees the sophisticated technologies and therapies of even rich, integrated systems overwhelmed by a hurricane Katrina, or a pandemic.

Apocalypse — Revelation.

This is the truth of our Floating World: its sometimes beautiful structures, finely balanced — until they aren't. How convincing they seem — how permanent — until, inevitably, they break up at the slightest movement of the deeper reality they ride upon.

And what IS that reality?

If the floating world we occupy is the froth of human ingenuity, what do we — what can we — know about the deep, powerful, currents beneath?

*There is no new thing under the sun (Eccl 1:9, KJV)*

*The Father of lights with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (Jas 1:17, KJV)*

*From everlasting to everlasting (Ps 90:2, KJV)*

And yet —

*I will be what I will be (Ex 3:14, NIV alt.)*

*Behold I will do a new thing (Is 43:19, KJV)*

*A new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1, KJV)*

Paradoxically, God's true reality, on which we float, is at once unchanging, and yet ever new. The creative power that brought the universe into being, and continues to bring it into harmony with Divine Intention, carries on its work. It is powerful in motion like the wind, and constant like the rocks and hills. Compared to the brittle fragility of our Floating World, the reality of God is the sea: dynamic, fathomless, eternal.

What is revealed: Unknowing

*Men's hearts failing them for fear (Lk 21:26, KJV)*

*Many will go here and there to increase knowledge (Dan 12:4, NIV)*

Why do times of uncertainty strike fear into even those who seek and pray to a great and good God? Those who can tell many stories of God's care and providence?

Why WAS the power out at our house? How long would it be out? What would happen if it didn't come back on?

What IS Covid 19? Where did it come from? Will it ever stop? What will happen if it doesn't?

It's the unknowing that makes us fearful and crazy, even dangerous. That paralyzes in the middle of the night. What if?

What if I get sick?

What if a loved one needs hospital care but there are no beds?

What if I have a bad reaction to a vaccine?

What if vaccines are a malicious plot?

What if the variants outrun the vaccines?

(Ironically, it's been acceptance of the limitations of human knowledge that has brought the benefits of modern medicine, among other things. The scientific method is all about starting with what you don't know, asking a question about it (what if... ?) , conducting an experiment, and learning as a result.)

So, a new disease of unknown origin? Triggering human behaviour that we don't understand? With political and social implications that we can't foresee?

The thing is: we've never known, as God knows — either what is coming, or even what has passed. We don't even know our own thoughts and motivations.

*It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps (Jer 10:23, KJV)*

We are not the Knowers.

God is the Knower.

His ways, above ours — and yet also deeply underlying ours, in that our brains, our organs of “knowing” are his creation — are beyond our knowing.

We see through a glass darkly — as though looking into depths and depths of sea.

“It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble; it's what you know for sure that just ain't so,” — Mark Twain, except it probably wasn't Mark Twain who said it — we don't know that for sure either.

What is revealed: What to DO?

“When in trouble or in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout,” — a little rhyme my sister used to say.

When the power went out unexpectedly, against a backdrop of pandemic anxieties, it would've made sense for me to check the local papers for notices of scheduled outages, or to realize that my cell service was slow because my phone was still trying to find wifi. But not

knowing immediately produced anxiety, and anxiety produced adrenaline, and adrenaline led to the overwhelming impulse to do something — anything!

When our Floating World seems to be breaking up — from whatever cause, whether war, or social or political instability, or changing climate, or a world pandemic, or even a personal health scare — and we feel in the dark, confused, and afraid, the impulse is to Do Something — Anything! “Run in circles, scream and shout.”

I often think of Naaman, whose story is told in 2 Kings 5. Great and admired Commander in the Syrian army, he was afflicted with leprosy, which in natural course would eventually render him outcast from everyone and everything he valued. His wife was told of Elisha, the prophet and healer, by her Israelite slave girl, and Naaman went with full retinue to the prophet’s home to seek a cure. He expected to be given some great task to carry out, or at the very least for Elisha to perform a magic ritual of healing and remove his disease. When instead he was instructed — not in person, but by the prophet’s messenger — to simply go to the Jordan river and bathe seven times, the commander was incensed and humiliated! There was nothing in the instruction or the way it was communicated that acknowledged either his high position or his extraordinary skills and power by which he might perform a great feat and help effect his own cure! His servants knew him well and called him on it:

*My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great things, would you not have done it?*

*How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’! (2Ki 5:13)*

Just do it.

To his credit, Naaman listened, and showed wisdom in humbling himself to wash seven times in the Jordan, and was healed.

This was possibly the hardest and most courageous thing Naaman the great captain, esteemed by king and people, had ever done. The strength, courage, and strategic skill that had helped him win many other battles were useless against his disease. His floating world was collapsing and he didn’t know how to heal himself. Brave charges against the enemy — Do Something ! — would be useless. He had to abandon his ego, and his confidence in his own skill, and to admit that his healing was in hands other than his own.

Humility, trust.

Radical Trust.

It's not an original phrase, but I can't think of a better to emphasize how the trust I'm thinking of — needed so much in times of upheaval, confusion, and fear — is far from apathetic, far from passive. It is robust trust: muscular. (Some might use the word “faith” instead, but I find “trust” feels more immediate, more rooted in the body, as a nursing child turns in trust to its mother, even when it can't yet articulate why.)

To trust radically is to sometimes resist our strong natural impulse to Do Something — Anything! *Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. (Ex 14:13, KJV)*

Now, by Radical Trust, I don't mean the thinking that says we should abandon or ignore the lifelines God throws us when we're in distress and confusion. Like the joke about the man stuck on his roof in a flood, who refused rescue and then was told by God, “I sent you two boats and a helicopter, what were you waiting for?” Nor do I mean blandly quoting, “the poor are with you always” to justify ignoring the needs of others. We are expected to be aware and grateful of the help and benefits God provides every day, and to make use of them. We are enjoined to serve and care for our families, our brethren and sisters, neighbours, even our enemies. Trust is not the same as idleness; even the nursing babe turns its head to the breast and sucks.

Radical Trust is awareness that not we, but God is Sovereign over the universe and all that is in it. Radical Trust knows that it's not ours to predict the currents or to direct the waves beneath our Floating World.

To say we will know, we will decide, we will solve the great movements that arise beneath the Floating World is pride and folly. This is the thinking that says everything depends on human action: the renewing of Creation, the reordering of societies, the bringing of justice to the nations. This is false. We do not know the world; we do not know ourselves — our lives too short, and our perspective too limited to be tasked with stilling the waves, with bringing the Floating World — let alone the great depths beneath it — into harmony with the goodness of God's intent. This is not the work of the Floating World. This is the work of the deep ocean of God's Being and Spirit; His power, intention, and wisdom driving the life-giving currents by the warmth of his love.

Radical Trust is difficult, counterintuitive.

It is an act of stillness: to pray — to listen.

To do what you can.

Where you are.

With what you are given.

Apocalypse — Revelation

We have been jolted awake to find ourselves in darkness that is unexpected and unexplained. The world that seemed so stable is revealed to be merely a froth of human systems floating on the surface of something much deeper, something that is at once dynamic and unchanging: the power and purpose of God. Our unknowing is revealed. We cannot see into the depths, or into the dark ahead, and our own wisdom does not tell us how to proceed.

And that's good news. Because it is in this revelation — this apocalypse — of the floating world and our own ignorance, that we are freed from the illusion of our own wisdom and strength. Freed from the fiction that the precarious bubble of human society is all there is. Freed to rest on the unfathomable depths and movements of God's love. And free, in Radical Trust, to set about the work we are meant for: to be his hands reaching out to comfort and help others also in the dark.

I do not suggest that *all things continue as they were from the beginning (2Pet 3:4)*, or that God's promises are of air, like sea foam. It's not at all that transformation of the earth isn't coming — it's that it's always been coming, and we of the Floating World had forgotten. Strangely, it seems SARS CoV-2 Covid 19, has not only reminded us, but revealed to us very clearly what it is we are called to do:

Stay Home — Shelter in Place

Be mindful of the needs and vulnerabilities of others

Avoid infection yourself

Wait for guidance from trusted sources

In other words:

Be Still

Love one another

Be holy — set apart

Trust in the Lord

Radical Trust

And we will know that like a planned power outage — at a set time — of which *knoweth no man (Matt 24:36, KJV)* — the lights will come on.