

Panic Glutton

By Theodore Dalrymple

My reaction to world affairs veers between complacency and panic. Either it is the end of the world, or everything will continue as before. I have been through enough world crises to know that not all of them end in catastrophe; it does not follow, however, from the fact that I have so far always recovered from illnesses, that I am immortal.



The past couple of weeks have not been free of turmoil, and sometimes it has crossed my mind that I am about to be plunged into abject poverty. On the plus side is the fact that, if I am to suffer abject poverty, the great majority of mankind will do

so also, which is some kind of consolation, though it ought not to be.

In the meantime, nothing has changed in the way I conduct my life. I assume that the value of our investments has declined, but I am not moved sufficiently to inquire into by how much. They are worth what they are worth, and I lack the knowledge or the inclination to protect them from bear markets, recessions, slumps, depressions, and the like.

On the other hand, I am marginally less assured than I was

that they are sufficient to see us through comfortably to our demise. What goes down must go up, no doubt, but I'm only too aware that it took twenty years for shares in general to regain their value after the 1929 crash, and we don't have twenty years to wait.

During the Korean War, my father, thinking that a general conflagration was inevitable, and before the penury in Europe caused by the Second World War was quite over, stockpiled tinned fruit in the attic, where it stayed for more than a decade until it started to leak through the ceilings of the bedrooms.

The Cuban Missile Crisis provoked panic buying in the United States, though not in the Soviet Union where the rule in any case was to buy what there was and not what you wanted, in the hope of being able to barter it for something else later.

More recently, not long before the first COVID lockdown, there was a panic in Britain over a projected shortage of toilet paper. I can't now recall the rationale for this fear, but it led to desperate scenes in supermarkets where, when the shelves emptied of this essential product, people who bought enough for a cholera epidemic were upbraided and even physically attacked for their selfishness.

More recently still, I lived through a mustard panic in France (and survived). The Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed what no one had ever suspected before: that most of the mustard consumed in Europe comes from Ukraine (I had always thought it came from Dijon). The crop that year of the other possible source, Canada, had failed, and so the population was panicked into buying all it could find. Supermarkets instituted a rationing system.

I am not completely immune myself from the siren song of panic buying. It occasionally occurs to me to wonder how long we could get by in the event of total breakdown of the

distribution system with the stock of food that we have in the house, the answer being "Not very long." Should I not rush out and buy the large sacks of rice and lentils that are to be found at modest cost in shops serving Indian communities? After all, if I had to survive on one or two very simple commodities, rice and lentils would be my choice.

But of course, rice and lentils need to be cooked, and to cook them requires a source of heat and water. For water, we are not too badly placed: There is a river at the bottom of the garden, and we have buckets. We also have a plentiful supply of wood, though it has to be cut. We have chain saws, both electrical and fuel-driven, to cut it, but if the supply chain of food breaks down to the point that we depend on rice and lentils, there might not be any electricity, and fuel will be scarce. I should store fuel, therefore, but it would also be wise to stockpile logs beforehand for our open fire and wood-burning stoves, for when you rely on wood for heat, you quickly realize how much of it you need. Before we had a chain saw, I learned how much hard work it was to chop down a tree and turn its trunk into firewood, and by nature sedentary, I did not much enjoy it.

Lighting the wood could also become a problem without a supply of matches. We should lay them in, therefore, in large quantities while they are still available. I ought to start gathering pine cones, of which we have plenty, as fire lighters, as well as the commercial variety of fire lighter.

Man does not live by rice and lentils alone. It is not difficult to think of dried or otherwise preserved or preservable comestibles that could tide us over for a prolonged period of chaos and civil war. And before long, the list of things necessary to survive a period of complete economic collapse has grown to encompass the contents of a simple grocery, pharmacy, and hardware store, candles included.

And in conditions of general economic collapse, of course, in which stockpiling of food would become necessary to survival, it is hardly to be expected that the desperate population, less provident than we, would leave us to enjoy the fruits of our foresight. Marauding bands would seek provisions wherever they could find them, and rumor would soon find us out. We would have to have some means of defending ourselves and repelling the marauders. Garden equipment would not do, we would need a gun; and not just a gun sufficient to defend against one or two, but a weapon sufficient to mow down a crowd, if need be.

Starting from fears of impending economic crisis, I pass to prediction of penury and civilizational collapse, to the need for immediate action. I have known people, indeed, who have passed to such action, and who lived for years in a perpetual state of terror of the imminent end of the world as they had known it. Reading the news can drive you mad; we are never more than an extrapolation or two away from madness.

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