

Affliction

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Affliction

CARLO ROTELLA

“**B**efore I knew what affliction meant,” wrote Mary Rowlandson in her account of being captured by Indians during King Philip’s War, “I was ready sometimes to wish for it.” Until sunrise on February 20, 1676, the “dreadful hour” when she woke to find friends and neighbors already “bleeding out of their heart-blood upon the ground” and the smoke of burning buildings “ascending to heaven,” she had “lived in prosperity, having the comforts of the world about me, my relations by me, my heart cheerful, and taking little care for anything.” But the very easiness of those pre-tribulation times had made her uneasy; she had wondered why the Lord did not visit sorrows upon her. If, as her Bible said, “whom the Lord loveth he chastiseth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth,” then to live without affliction was to live at the margins of the Lord’s attention. So, looking backward at the end of her account, she found a curious sort of relief in having suffered through the bloody raid and eleven hard weeks of captivity before coming home at last: “But now I see the Lord had His time to scourge and chasten me. The portion of some is to have their afflictions by drops, now one drop and then another; but the dregs of the cup, the wine of astonishment, like a sweeping rain that leaveth no food, did the Lord prepare to be my portion. Affliction I wanted, and affliction I have had, full measure (I thought), pressed down and running over.” She had come to understand the brittle shabbiness of the life she had made prior to the day of the attack, a life built of “outward things” that are “the vanity of vanities, and vexation of spirit, . . . they are but a shadow, a blast, a bubble, and things of no continuance.”

And there, after a final injunction to rely wholly on God for salvation, Rowlandson arrived at her *finis*. Her narrative was published in 1682. For 320 years she has been lying awake in those closing paragraphs—“when all

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are fast about me, and no eye open, but His who ever waketh”—in fearfully ecstatic contemplation of “the awful dispensation of the Lord towards us.” These days she has plenty of company in sleeplessness, if not in ecstasy.

Even with Rowlandson’s help, it took me a while to identify relief as the odd element in my—and, I think, our—response to the events of September 11. I am not Puritan enough (who is, anymore?) to take heart in the belief that the Lord must love us because he scourges us. Rather, I woke up one morning a couple of days after the 11th and realized that for the first time in my adult life I was not secretly half-expecting an imminent blow that would knock the cozily arranged components of life as I know it to irretrievable pieces. I had been walking around for twenty years in cringing expectation of an actual physical impact that would signal the dreadful hour’s arrival. Because so much of what is wrong with us is compressed into our cars—and because I live in Boston, where angry incompetence behind the wheel is pandemic—I had assumed that the shock in question would be that of one car hitting another with me inside. But when the planes hit the buildings, my half-expectation of imminent impact evanesced, ascending to heaven like smoke.

An eccentric millionaire playing at holy warrior—a villain of comic-book grotesquery, equal parts Howard Hughes, Charles Manson, and Cat Stevens—served us a taste of the wine of astonishment. It awakened me to the most unlikely of thirsts, a wish for affliction, already working within me and more generally within American culture.

Like many people I know (granted, a sample of humanity short on those who greet each new day with a smile and have a cheery word for everyone), I switched quickly from feeling that the events of September 11 were dreamlike and unreal to accepting them as perfectly normal instances of the world’s regular functioning. At the same time, the fantasy of perfectible safety that has flourished in American culture over the last two decades graduated from minor annoyance to suicidally foolish delusion. Dreamlike and unreal? How about armored vehicles for commuters, seemingly designed to ensure that we go to war in the Middle East from time to time so we can keep filling their giant gas tanks at bargain prices; a missile defense shield instead of a foreign policy; a widespread expectation that we can fight a war without a single casualty on our side; gated communities that offer the fleeting impression of security at the cost of making public life increasingly unsustainable; threat-neutralizing incantations (Do Not Ingest, No Step, Do Not Douse with Gasoline and Set On Fire) on anything that might conceivably give somebody a boo-boo . . . how’s *that* for dreamlike and unreal?

We seem to have willed ourselves to forget, officially, for a couple of decades, that a whole country cannot order Domino’s, screen its calls, and hunker down in front of the TV in the vague hope that everything will be okay. Compared to most of those with whom we share the planet,

Americans (including those who have reason to regard themselves as unlucky or oppressed) lead a collective life of fabulously heedless let-them-eat-cake profligacy. Sooner or later, this state of affairs was going to inspire somebody to do something bad to us as a people, and we (again, as a people) should have prepared in advance for such an inevitability. Since September 11, as we return to something more like waking life, we have been remembering what we chose to forget. We forgot that highly motivated unreasonable people will, as a matter of course, hurt blameless individuals just because they can. We forgot that we cannot control all the consequences of our behavior, and that therefore we would do well to envision those consequences as well as we can before we act. We forgot, most critically of all, that it is imperative to know the world in which we move, and to know it intimately at street level and from a variety of perspectives, rather than watching highlight loops of it on cable and hoping the alarm system will keep it all safely out there while we cower inside, quivering piles of weight-room muscle or food-court fat in fuzzy sweat clothes. Hey, we forgot. It happens.

Of course, we did not really succeed in forgetting, or even in trying to. If we closed our eyes and pulled the covers over our heads, it was because we knew there was a monster in the closet, and we did find ways to imagine that monster. As Jeanine Basinger, Anthony Lane, and others have pointed out, we have been rehearsing the events of September 11 for those same twenty years in our popular fantasies—quintessentially in the action movies that have perfected the formula of explosions, collapsing buildings, malign perpetrators, and special-effects bystanders sent pinwheeling by gouts of orange flame. The action movies of the 1980s and 1990s stink of hubris and ingratitude; in retrospect, they seem to suggest that a whole culture was asking for it (which is not the same thing as deserving it when it happens).

But retrospect has also imbued the genre with, of all things, a moral charge. The composite rolling cinematic fireball produced by Hollywood over the last two decades is more than a mere blast, more than just a thing of no continuance that vexes the spirit. In light of the definitive explosions of September 11, the many fake ones that preceded them now seem to indicate a readiness to wish for affliction before we knew what it meant. All those unconvincing last-second saves by heroic protagonists (5 . . . “The red wire or the blue wire?” . . . 4 . . . “Dude, pick one!” . . . 3 . . . “Okay! Red! No, blue!” . . . 2 . . . snip . . . “Phew, it’s Miller Time”) were never the point. They were, rather, part of the necessary apparatus of fantasy, the synthetic sweetener that masked the strong taste of the wine of astonishment. We were asking for it, in code, the way Mary Rowlandson was asking for it: even as we dreamed the black-lotus dream of a hermetic life, we felt the urgent need to awaken in time to save ourselves.

I am not attempting the doomed trick of finding a silver lining in the events of September 11. The dream-ending, or at least dream-attenuating, effect of the blow does not make anybody's suffering worthwhile or proper. The papers are full of bad news and the expectation of more bad news; my fellow citizens are filled with worry and anguish; members of my family are in harm's way. But I would not accept the dream's return, if that were even possible; I did not want to dream it in the first place. We were always in harm's way; the bad news was always coming; we should have been more engaged, less thoughtless, more vigilant, less satisfied.

We are, of course, not done with make-believe, as our new set of post-September-11 delusions will attest. We take Cipro superstitiously when we are not sick, even though we know that by doing so we damage the drug's chances of working against future illness. We put up with far too much talk of a war of good against evil, rather than of one set of interests against another: it is still strictly business, even if the other side has generously ceded the moral high ground. The president insists that he believes in a universe "of moral design," even though all leading indicators point to a darker and more chaotic truth that might be more effectively addressed by a more hard-boiled philosophical system. None of this is an improvement.

But if the shocks of September 11 were always on the way—and if, by refusing to see them coming, we made them more likely to happen and worse in their effect when they did—then as a people we are better off now than we were before the dreadful hour's arrival. Even the current national climate of huffing righteousness, conditioned as it is by an enlivened sense of limits and consequences in a complex world, amounts to a significant improvement over, as a friend put it in a recent e-mail, "being a big stupid bully." Like many other citizens put off by the autoerotic flexing and world-historical bad manners of post-Cold War national style (I mean, did America have to rip off its figurative football helmet and thrust its index finger in everybody's face after every three-yard gain?), I am less embarrassed to love my country than I was before September 11. And, to put it crudely, I like our long-term chances better than I did before. A necessarily imperfect engagement with the world is infinitely less dangerous than the dream of perfectible disengagement.

"I can remember a time," wrote Mary Rowlandson near the end of her narrative, "when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is other ways with me." With us, too, if we are lucky.