



# Preparing for disaster will make us stronger

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A COUPLE of weeks ago I wrote a piece here about the striking growth in apocalyptic thinking in recent years under the headline ["What if Doomsday comes and nobody notices?"](#)

Collapse of civilisation books abound, films like 2012 and The Road reflect the trend, and the policy wonks are falling over each other to paint the direst possible picture of the consequences of "failing to reach agreement" at Copenhagen.

Yet in practice we tend to tune out "we're all doomed" as a counsel of despair. We prefer to see extreme events like the recent floods in Dumfries and Cumbria, or the financial crash, not as signs of impending systemic collapse but rather as aberrations, one-offs, interruptions. Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible.

In writing about all this I was not, as many assumed, suggesting that we are indeed facing apocalypse. My point is that our refusal even to contemplate the possibility is a failure of nerve and will lead to failures of policy.

Conversely, a willingness to face up to the worst the future may hold can release new capacities and opportunities in the present. While doom-sayers in the non-fiction world are usually trying to frighten us into action, in literature the purpose of the end of the world device is often to inspire us with thoughts of the new society that might rise from the ashes.

I was gratified therefore when [Bill Jamieson weighed in some days later](#) with a coruscating piece of apocalyptic thinking about the economic crisis. He spared us any talk of green shoots or guarded optimism.

Instead he painted a bleak picture of a financial system more fragile than we are prepared to admit, and a Britain that may be entering a "Japan-style lost decade" – "as good as bust, gutted with debt, spent out and played out."

And Scotland? Engaged in "a bleak crocodile march on a national road to nowhere that has ended with a political class out of money, out of ideas and out of time."

If only he had been around earlier in the year when we in the International Futures Forum tried to interest anyone in the Scottish financial establishment in contemplating anything other than a "repair and continue" scenario.

Bill Jamieson gives us the collapse narrative, "the dance of the dream-led masses down the dark mountain". But sadly it is rarely a call to action. More often it prompts either denial ("cheer up Bill it may never happen") or despair ("Whatever". "There's nothing any of us can do").

Last November, the Queen visited the London School of Economics and asked why nobody had seen the credit crunch coming.

The [elegant response](#) subsequently submitted to Her Majesty from the British Academy was a variation on these same themes – denial and despair. We did see it coming, Ma'am, they said – but we didn't want to believe it ("most of us were convinced the banks knew what they were doing ... nobody wanted to believe that the bankers' judgment could be faulty").

And those that did believe crisis was on the way couldn't see what might be done to avert it ("the regulators did not have the instruments needed to take away the punch bowl when the party was in full swing").

Time and again we see this same pattern: rabbits trapped in the headlights of a future they are not ready to contemplate.

So how might we break out of this cycle? My experience suggests two key elements. One is consciously to engage with the full, unvarnished enormity of what the world might throw at us in the immediate future – climate change, energy shortages, community breakdown, food and water scarcity, financial collapse, pandemics ... and so on.

In my organisation we have found that playing something we call the ["world game"](#) is a great way of engaging people in such an exploration. The material examined is challenging and potentially overwhelming: diverse global trends and worrying discontinuities.

But the "game" wards off denial and despair. People are better able to game their way into complexity than analyse their way in. And it is emotionally easier to engage with these issues as role players – indeed a competitive cycle to out-gloom each other can develop.

Secondly, we need to prepare ourselves as best as possible for the crises we are thus able to anticipate. Ian Mitroff has been at the leading edge of crisis management in organisations for 25 years. His experience is that "you can and will survive – even prosper – but if, and only if, you are prepared emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually."

Mitroff's ["seven essential lessons for surviving disaster"](#) apply equally to individuals, governments, maybe even societies. The first is "right heart" – emotional resilience. Another is "right soul" – "effective crisis management requires a special type of inner spiritual growth. Nothing devastates the soul as much as a crisis."

Mitroff's contingency planning exercises rehearse the psychological impact of crisis as much as the technical aspects – the group dynamics, the search for a scapegoat, the emotional trauma. By rehearsing – not only contemplating but seeking to gain an experience of what the worst feels like – we are not only better prepared. We also learn more about ourselves and each other, discovering capacities we perhaps never imagined.

And that is the most remarkable potential benefit. For it turns out we might well discover our better selves in the process. Rebecca Solnit, for example, has recently published a study on ["disaster communities"](#) – the remarkably sturdy, caring societies that arise in the immediate wake of disaster.

She suggests that, like machines that reset to factory settings after a power cut, so "human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster – the possibility of paradise is already within us as a default setting".

And if it is already in us it can be evoked today – with or without disaster. The political class may be running out of money. But we are rich in other resources. We have plenty of ideas. And there is still time.

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