

The Blast is Back

Like everyone else lately, I've been thinking about radiation, ever since the calamitous earthquake and tsunami struck Japan in March, killing thousands and unreparably damaging its Fukushima nuclear plant. Actually, I've been thinking about radiation again, because its horrors inspired an essay I wrote years ago, a kind of meditation, if you will, about a great childhood fear that affected me in ways the adults seemed oblivious to. Are we adults today, I wondered, failing our children by not understanding the fear that they may have about nuclear power. Then I read Hanna Beech's article in Time (April 4, 2011), about why it took a nuclear crisis to energize many of Japan's young people as a catalyst for changing Japan's ossified establishment. Although my essay has nothing directly to do with the young of Japan, maybe it does. Maybe it will resonate.

The Blast Is Back

An essay for the children's sake
by Charles Strohmer

Life for me began when I started to think, and I can pinpoint that great unnerving awakening as if it were yesterday. Dateline: mid-1950s. Inside our cozy home in northwest Detroit, The Bomb as mushroom cloud of doom had entered our living room. What was I, a few years old? Instead of Soupy Sales, the threat of World War 3 stared back at me from our small black and white Zenith. Previous wars would seem like fist fights among neighbors, if "they" dropped The Bomb. Its dismal strains of meaning was on everyone's lips, its ash grey shades of death on the cover of Life magazine. The unnerving years of the Federal Defense Administration, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the scary A-Bomb and H-Bomb tests conducted by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were here to haunt me.

RADIATION. That's what did it for me amidst all the propaganda. It became the ubiquitous spectral presence of my childhood, and with it the switching on of my brain, and with that the adults no longer seemed safe but frightening, frighteningly real. I had begun to think, to live, even. But what an awakening! The child must now parry with this monolithic affront to its well-being; but child, you were delivered by the stork with the psychology of the grown, by which to cope with adult terror. I wonder today, did any adult notice? the threat of World War 3 stared back at me from our small black and white Zenith

RADIATION. It would track you down like death itself to seep through the tiniest cracks in your home to sizzle you like bacon frying in hot grease. Just let the Communists drop an A-Bomb on Detroit and you'd see, "they" said. Why here? The highly industrialized region of southeast Michigan, home of America's Big Three automakers and the nation's steel industry, would be among the first regions of the country destroyed by The Bomb if the Communists attacked, I learned.

And so arose Homeland Security 1.0. Never heard of this, children? Historians today call it the era of Civil Defense. And that's some education they gave us! Primitive TV infomercials and government pamphlets read like morality tales: it's your own fault if you die in The Blast, you didn't prepare properly. Billboards and bus adverts proclaimed what to do If The Bomb Falls. Countless radio PSAs commanded everyone: "When you hear the three-minute 'take cover' signal, turn your radio to a designated CONELRAD frequency." That, we learned, too, was located at 640 or 1240 on the AM dial. These were sacred government radio frequencies whose two functions were to thwart enemy bombers and provide civil defense information to the public in case of an attack. Right. We children listened and thought about it. We learned to suspect a surprise attack at any time, and that there was no defense.

Still the propaganda flowed. If the demon were summoned I would be given ample warning to defend myself. For years every Saturday afternoon at precisely 1pm, "take cover" sirens screamed wildly for a few minutes from loudspeakers atop fire stations or tall telephone poles systematically placed across Detroit. So I'm thinking now. I question the absolute regularity of these sirens. After months and months of them, surely the Kremlin knows that American citizens are now blasé at 1pm Saturday. Look, the Commies were the worst sort of devils, weren't they? Surely they wouldn't drop the bomb on us on a Saturday? Maybe they would do it when we slept. That would be a mercy. But who knew? And so I waited for that blinding flash of light that still epitomizes the cruel irony of adult brilliance and insanity.

Three cheers, though. The government was on top of things. Propaganda films of macabre experiments began circulating. These showed us entire faux neighborhoods in the desert whose streets were chock-a-block with small A-frame homes. Fully equipped but sans real humans, these fabricated government movie sets were then subjected to "controlled" atomic blasts. What remained? melted appliances, dented car fenders, splinters of white picket fences and porch swings, parts of mannequins? were expertly examined and then touted as "proof" that under some conditions some people would live on. Incredible. The government didn't believe in miracles.

CONELRAD "alert exercises" continued across the nation to study feeding programs in cities and communication systems. And panic. U.S. army personnel were trotted out to state publicly that they were no longer afraid of an atomic war. Pardon? Traffic routing plans were developed to lead people by the quickest routes out of the cities. Right. I could not stop thinking about why the adult world had created a device by which to destroy itself.

The heck with them, and the traffic. I finally decided that I would jump on my Schwinn and find my own way of escape peddling past traffic snarls. But, child, you might not even have time to reach your bike. Ah..., neither the propaganda nor the magic nor the Schwinn had been invented that could really save me from RADIATION. When no one was around I spent time escaping on my magic carpet, a small Persian rug in our hallway.

What in the world had the adults gotten me into? And what if the dreaded air raid siren screamed midweek while I was in school? Not to worry, said the teachers, as they drilled us on how "duck and cover." Never heard of that one, either? A nifty little exercise in which you were taught how to hide swiftly from The Blast by slipping under your school desk. I'm not joking. If I were walking home from school, they had that covered, too. Child, run like mad to one of those buildings that displays a Fallout Shelter sign. These were ugly brown and yellow triangular signs fastened to the outside of certain municipal buildings and churches to denote the safety of a public bomb shelter. Right. Denial is the father of false hope, but adults had to believe they could survive the demon of atomic death.

Preparations at home capped for me. In answer to a question I once asked about why we never drank from the huge glass jugs of water stored in the basement, I heard: "It's for us to drink if radiation contaminates the water supply." But I was good at math. Two plus two was on my mind. I knew that those few jugs would only last our large family for several days, and that RADIATION, with its lethal twin FALLOUT stuck around for years. Denial is the father of false hope, but adults had to believe they could survive the demon of atomic death. The children learned absurdity from their betters.

Not to be outdone by the government, Hollywood provided a whole genre of atomic imagery in film. I remember one movie that began with the tag line THE END spread across the screen. It was kind of catchy, that. Made you wonder if the guy in the projection booth had got the reels backward. But then a large group of terrified adults appear. They are yanking on their children's arms and scrambling up a mountainside as a large mushroom cloud blooms in the distance behind them. Their immediate goal is a deep valley down the other side of the mountain, where they will be shielded from the lethal twins.

Those who make it settle in that valley, and they storyline then becomes one of their trials and tribulations as they adjust to a primitive life without electricity, cars, food, clothing. You get the picture. The film ends with several of the families (I don't recall how long they waited) making their way up out of the valley. Hopeful expressions of a brighter future grace their faces. THE BEGINNING flashes up on the screen as they climb. Child, what really awaits them, Hollywood told us that, too, but you had to see films like "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms," whose mutant monsters rampaged the countryside. Such were the government's and Hollywood's futile attempts to wrench the narrative from incredulity to hope.

Looking back, I now realize that the adults were still stunned by the hells of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was barely ten years after. Could we expect much real hope from them? Not even Oppenheimer or Einstein had provided adequate product-warning labels. So how could my fears be set other than on edge? The Blast was too recent, too horrific, too almighty, and if not for the twisted I-beams and charred bodies in Japan, too unbelievable. The adults should have done us better, I thought. Something seemed terribly wrong with them and the world they were leaving for us.

Looking ahead, children today see that something remains terribly wrong. Are the adults any wiser sixty years on? The global sigh of relief about The Blast heard round the world at the end of the Cold War era has become the constant rustle of edgy global tensions with the Terror War. In 1962, Washington and Moscow played chicken with The Bomb and brought the world to the brink of nuclear war for 13 days that seemed an eternity. Today, the fear of Iran or a terrorist group getting The Bomb and exploding it is being spread with increasing intensity. The adult in me recalls the child and wonders if the adults today think the children are deaf and blind. Do we even know that the children are thinking about this? That they see through the false security we indoctrinate them with, as primitive today as it was in the 1950s? Do we even care what they are awakening to?

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