Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Responses to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats

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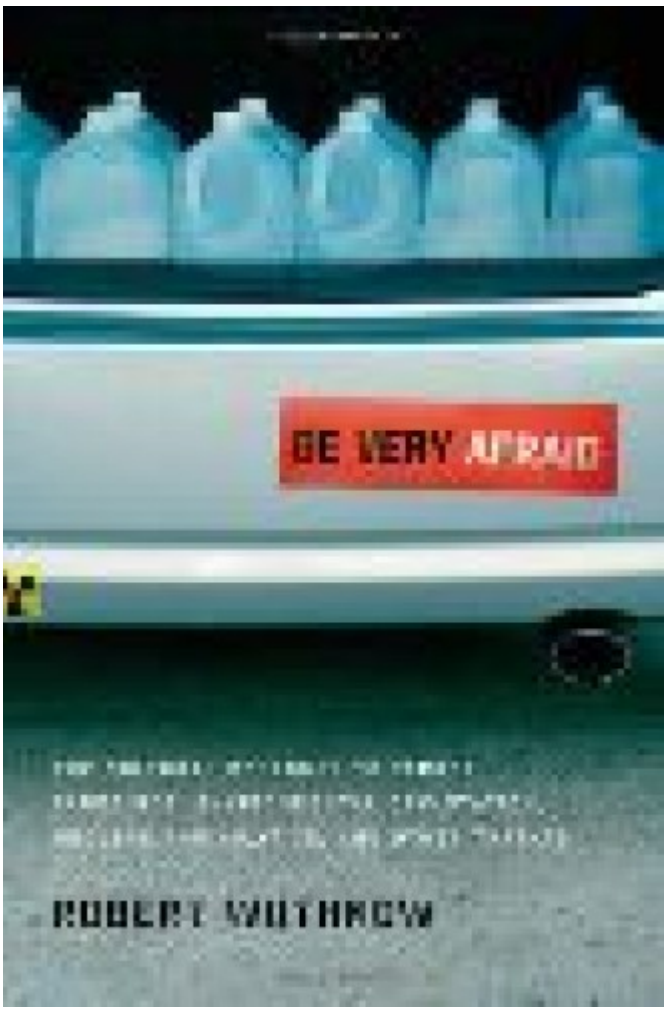
In Review



Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Responses to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats

Robert Wuthnow
Oxford University Press

A funeral is a curious phenomenon. In the face of the death of a loved one, friends and relatives gather for a carefully choreographed dance of ritualistic acts. Condolences are given. Music is played. Words are spoken. Food is shared. Often the participants have not seen the deceased for years, but going to the funeral nonetheless is seen as the right thing to do. It is important to pay one's last respects.

The significance of these acts, of course, is for the living, not the dead. From a scientific perspective, a funeral is a singularly impractical act: no dead person has ever been brought back to life by a well-written eulogy or a fittingly chosen hymn. The objective world is unchanged by the ritual. The deceased remains dead. The widow or widower remains alone.

From a religious perspective, how ever, the funeral is transformative. It not only serves to channel a potentially destructive human emotion, grief, into the innocuous outlet of pure busyness, it also serves a fundamental communal function. As baptism signals the transformation from non-Christian to Christian and as a wedding signals the transformation from single to married, a funeral is the community's way of marking new social roles for those left behind. The spouse becomes a widow or widower. Children become fatherless or motherless. Death creates a seismic shift in the meaning of the world, and a new set of social roles must be ascribed to and accepted by those left behind so that meaning can be reconstituted. Only then can life continue.

In this sense, a funeral is a symbolic phenomenon—one that would seem to have little in common with society's responses to the practical threats posed by nuclear arms, global warming or the H1N1 virus. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow disagrees. The surprising thesis of Wuthnow's *Be Very Afraid* is that our leading scientific and political responses to the greatest threats of our day—nuclear annihilation, terrorism, environmental destruction and pandemics—are often far more symbolic than they are practical. Further, these responses are far more about

allowing people to come to grips with the new reality of the threat than they are about ending it.

Wuthnow, who has made a career of debunking commonly held assumptions about contemporary society, contests the popular notion that fear is paralyzing. The conventional wisdom, he tells us, is that “things . . . too frightening to think about are easier to handle by denying that they could happen.” In the face of human annihilation, we become overwhelmed. We repress and ignore. We avert our eyes. This, in turn, exacerbates the threat, bringing the feared outcome closer to reality. Or so the argument goes.

Wuthnow argues that the evidence suggests precisely the opposite. Human beings have what he calls a “bias for action”—a basic need to respond to that which we fear through concrete interventions. He writes:

> The cultural response to human fragility, judging from the horrendous threats that humanity has faced in recent decades and continues to face, consists in large measure of turning extreme dangers into manageable situations—of redefining imponderable problems into smaller predicaments that we can more easily grasp.

The first atomic bomb had just been dropped on Japan in August 1945 when humans got to work attempting to defuse the new threat. The day after the bombing of Hiroshima, an editorial in the *New York Times* spoke of the “horrible prospect of utter annihilation opened by atomic bomb.” By early September, the same publication was invoking the moral responsibility of all Americans to act to control nuclear arms and “to prevent [our] reversion to the Dark Ages and the spiritual, mental and political loss of all that our material progress has made possible.”

By 1946, the 16-person Atomic Energy Commission was founded and charged with “the most austere guardianship ever attempted in peacetime.” Many individual Americans took action as well, building bomb shelters in their backyards or participating in civil defense drills at home or in school. In 1951 the Civil Defense Administration circulated a now infamous film to American elementary schools featuring the animated Bert the Turtle and his instructions to “duck and cover” upon first signs of an atomic blast. “Being calm in the face of anxiety and helping children avoid becoming neurotics was something the public could do,” Wuthnow observes. “It was a way of taking responsibility in small and relatively easy steps amid the

threat of nuclear holocaust."

Our societal responses to more recent threats have followed a similar pattern of engagement rather than avoidance. One week after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a poll showed that 53 percent of Americans believed that they or a member of their family "might become a victim of a terrorist attack" in the near future. In October 2001, the invasion of Afghanistan began—a response to the perceived connection between the Taliban there and the 9/11 attacks. Soon after, President George W. Bush created a new government agency, the Department of Homeland Security, and it in turn created a civil defense program to combat terrorism. It included strict monitoring of all airline passengers and a color-coded system to deliver daily public updates on terrorist threat levels.

Global warming has become the latest perceived threat to world (or species) survival. By 2006, 77 percent of the American public believed that "global warming was becoming a major threat to our country and our world"; 68 percent believed that "immediate action" was necessary to avert disaster. Former Vice President Gore, who considers global warming an impending holocaust, won an Oscar for his global-warming documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The Environmental Protection Agency has moved toward greater restraints on carbon emissions, and many U.S. consumers have taken action—changing the car they drive and the way they heat their homes.

In each of these cases, Wuthnow argues, the predominant societal reaction to an overwhelming threat was not avoidance but engagement. People sought to end the threat through action. But claiming that humans have a bias to action is very different from claiming that the resulting actions are efficacious. Part of the power of Wuthnow's book is the careful case he makes for how the human need to do *something*—to stay busy in the face of a threat rather than to deny it—often results in a flurry of action that is utterly ineffectual.

Like the family members who come to grips with the reality of their loved one's death by busying themselves with choosing a casket and flowers, humans face the possible annihilation of the species via global warming by driving hybrid automobiles and choosing paper over plastic at the grocery store's checkout line. The result of these efforts is not an end to the threat any more than the well-executed funeral promises to bring the deceased back to life. Rather, through these actions, "grave danger is thus normalized, . . . turned into the banal, the familiar," and individuals

are able to establish a new social identity for themselves relative to the threat. The Prius owner becomes an environmentalist (even while continuing to add carbon emissions to the atmosphere).

At other times, Wuthnow concedes, the human bias to action results in responses that are far from superficial: the United States and the Soviet Union engage in a decades-long arms race in response to the threat of nuclear annihilation; the U.S. invades Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11. Now, in the face of global warming, a growing number of scientists advocate acts of “geo-engineering,” including such programs as the release of sulfur particles into the upper atmosphere to thicken the air so more sunlight is bounced back into space and Earth’s temperature cools. By how much would Earth be cooled by such a program? Scientists disagree.

Unfortunately, the human bias for action can have profound costs, Wuth now warns. “One cost is the tendency to overreact, resulting in excessive expenditures or additional damage.” At times, the additional damage can be worse than the threat itself. More often than not, in the aftermath of even bold action the original threat remains.

Reading *Be Very Afraid* can be a bit frightening. We all realize that we face some horrendous threats in the world around us, and many of us fear that we are teetering on the brink of not one but multiple potential disasters. This is indeed distressing. The most sobering lesson of Wuthnow’s latest work, though, may be that our need to act may ultimately constitute the greatest threat of all.