A time to endure

As we approach another Trump presidency, I’ve been thinking a lot about Ecclesiastes.

by Valerie Weaver-Zercher in the January 2025 issue
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Two days after American voters once again hand Donald Trump the presidency, I visit my mother-in-law. She’s 99 years old and on what’s called a “mechanical soft” diet, having lost most of her teeth. So it’s all mashed potatoes, viscous cream soups, and slippery puddings. Her days at the retirement home are mostly the same, all

empty minutes on loop.

Today I tell her bits of news as she eats: a granddaughter's impending engagement, a cousin's widow now in hospice. She occasionally tilts her head in feigned interest, but mostly she doesn't pretend to care about any of it. When you're 99, you don't have time for falsity.

I wonder if she ever gets furious, like her neighbor down the hall, Dorothy, sometimes does. Some days Dorothy, who is 101 and thin and crumpled as a tissue, sits at the table behind my mother-in-law's, smiling sweetly and saying thank you when an aide brings a spoon for her ice cream. On quiet days she muses softly to herself about when her parents are going to check her out of this place. On other days Dorothy rages, bellowing an incantation about how everyone is out to get her money. She hunches forward, balls her hands into fists, and chants about the sonofabitch who took her across and about how you can all go to hell, hell, hell.

I don't know the source of Dorothy's anger, but I'm captivated by it. Maybe fury is just one face of boredom. The days kind of replay themselves around here, and you can either let torpor set in or else get massively pissed off.

I get it. Here we are, eight years after Trump took power, and it's déjà vu all over again. The racism and xenophobia and misogyny and insurrection and autocratic insanity. The enthusiastic support from White Protestants, more than two-thirds of whom voted for Trump. The cycles of numbness and sadness and fury and self-loathing. How stupid anyone was to have hoped for a different outcome, we think, even when we were the stupid optimists. Everything old is new again, singer Peter Allen crooned. It's all just a reprise.

So it is that the same thing keeps happening to Dorothy, and to us. The same damn thing. If the banality of yesterday's evil didn't make you cuss, maybe today's will. Here in the heart of Pennsylvania, the prize swing state, I, too, have longed to ball my hands into fists and walk down the street, yanking the Trump signs from the yards of all the nice White Christians and taking up one of Dorothy's profanity-laced chants in full.

Today Dorothy is calm, though, and smiles sweetly when I wave a greeting.

“I imagine your days get long,” I say to my mother-in-law now. I wonder if she might find words like *tedious*, or *monotonous*, or *yes, they’re boring as hell*. I wonder what it would take to rile her up, to tip her over into Dorothy-level anger at the tiresomeness of living a single day on repeat.

“Yes,” she acknowledges, taking a bite of watery chicken salad.

I wait to see if she’ll say more. “So what do you do when the days feel so long?” I press.

“Just endure,” she says evenly. Pushing her spoon into yellow gravy, she looks straight ahead.

“All things are wearisome, more than one can express,” says the writer of Ecclesiastes (1:8), and I wonder if he has been visiting his local retirement home, or maybe my home office. An occupational hazard of working in publishing is the very malaise of which the teacher speaks. Proposal after proposal tries to remake a tiresome concept into an original one, and proposal after proposal fails. Writers are convinced they’re saying something new about resilience or embodiment or finding the Divine in all things. They’re not.

“Of making many books there is no end,” the teacher writes, “and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12:12). Truly there is nothing new under the sun, he and I sigh together. “Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’?” he asks brightly, as if reading the first paragraph of the latest book proposal on my desk, keen with hope that *this* one will say something interesting. Then, in the same verse, the answer: “It has already been.”

It’s as if the teacher has been scrolling on my phone, too, wearying himself with the social media posts about what we’re all supposed to be doing in these days after the election. Perhaps his friends have, like mine, taken an instructional turn. Social media repeats itself at least as much as history does, and political moments like ours apparently bring out our internal parents. In the argot of the online resistance, which blends therapeutic, activist, and motivational vocabularies, we scold and coax each other into the proper way to respond. “Rest. Grieve. Tomorrow we work.” “Beloveds, I know you are feeling alone and afraid. But we need you in the fight.” There’s a lot of atomized wisdom from Toni Morrison, instructions to breathe, and excerpts from *A Wrinkle in Time* dropped onto floral backgrounds. We’re all anti-

fascist life coaches now.

By the time you read this, the instructions from the online chorus will have morphed in both tone and content. Regardless of specifics, though, I predict I will find them unctuous and didactic and overly familiar. There will still be a lot of bad poetry. In 2016 we riled each other up with jingoistic opinions and soothed each other with bromides about self-care. People coined catchphrases for the movement then, as they do now: here a platitude about the work before us, there a Thich Nhat Hanh quote beside a leaf.

I have to stop being so cynical, I told myself then, as now. Now, as then, I pledge to spend less time on social media. It helps, a bit. Helpful, too, is remembering that just because I'm sick of reading about something doesn't mean you are, and vice versa. Your cliché is my epiphany.

Still, the ennui can be hard to shake. All things are wearisome, I think alongside the teacher, in both the politics of autocracy and the dispatches of the resistance. Nothing exists about which we can say, "See, this is new." It has already been.

History is like the Hotel California: you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.

It's not quite existential despair the writer of Ecclesiastes is talking about when he writes that "what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done" (1:9). Sure, if you read far enough in the book, you'll get to the despair. Frederick Buechner summarizes the writer of Ecclesiastes and his book this way: "The dead are luckier than the living, he says, but luckiest of all are the ones who had the good sense never to get born in the first place."

But early on, in the first few chapters, I'd diagnose the teacher less with nihilism and more with good old-fashioned acedia. Acedia, which is traceable to a Greek word meaning "lack of care," is a certain listlessness of spirit—the "noonday devil," Evagrius of Pontus called it. It's not quite depression and not quite laziness; it's more akin to spiritual torpor. "When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, acedia offers a kind of spiritual morphine," writes Kathleen Norris: "you know the pain is there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn."

The writer of Ecclesiastes also betrays more than a little of his own self-regard. “I have acquired great wisdom,” he writes, and you can almost see the drooping cigarette, the beret at a tilt. “My mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge” (1:16). He’s as imperious as all the rest of us liberals. And maybe, since “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9) has become the truism of all truisms, the joke’s on us.

It takes vanity to say that all is vanity. During the next four years, I will need to guard against arrogant acedia, the self-referential malaise of the person who reads too much. In my despair, I risk turning less against the actual tyrant, less against the actual regime, and more against the aesthetic of the resistance.

My irritability is rooted, I know, in misdirected rage and unmetabolized sadness, maybe depression diagnosable by a mental health professional (or even a therapist-ish Instagram guru). Yet I see other progressive types doing it too: getting frustrated when other people aren’t feeling exactly the same thing about the prospect of a fascist future as we are, and at exactly the same time. We want others to panic or to rage or to cry at the same horrors and in the same manner and moment that we do. Last week someone told me that she had cried for hours the day after the election. I made my face look sympathetic while feeling irked by overwrought White women. Three days later I am the White woman collapsing in tears.

In the language of the teacher, we want everyone else’s season—a time to weep, a time to break down, a time to tear, a time to keep—to synchronize with ours. We become so devoted to our own brand of indignation, so exacting in our fervor, that we turn against the people with whom we must find common cause.

This moment in history is perilous in a way that I, given layers of privilege, am unable to comprehend. Here at the advent of a second Trump administration, which will surely sow exponentially more chaos and terror than the first, others will need to describe the exact shape and heft of those perils. We White Christians will need to shut up and listen to everyone else so we stop being so astonished that shitty history happens—and that we’re still the drivers of it. We’ll need historians and political scientists to tell us which loop of history is repeating itself, which curve of the coil we’re entering and when. And we’ll need activists and preachers and counselors and spiritual directors more than ever.

So I can speak only to some particular dangers of despair, and only because I know them intimately. “Despair kills, demeans, and leaves you mean as a snake,” theologian Emilie Townes once told an interviewer. Even now this essay grows scales and fangs. The hazard is that we will turn against the very people we need in these moments, thinking ourselves more astute, more wise, more radical, more sophisticated, or less complicit, less shallow, less narrow-minded.

Hazardous, too, is getting snug in our definitions of *us* and *them*. All of us, including my neighbors with the Trump signs, contain more than our political allegiances. In moments like this, we risk failing to notice slight shifts and important details: a growing justification for political violence among those we consider “our own,” perhaps, or quiet acts of faithfulness and tenderness and resistance among those we don’t.

The danger is that we carve out ever smaller niches in which to live out our fashionable nihilism. That we get choosy about the people with whom we’ll ride out the next four years, hunkering down only with those who share our precise register of disdain and discontent and dissent. And everybody else can just go to hell, hell, hell.

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Toward the end of Ecclesiastes, the writer says that “time and chance” happen to us all (9:11). Time and chance have happened to Dorothy and to my mother-in-law, and the curse or gift of a long life is that they just keep happening. “No one can anticipate the time of disaster,” the teacher writes—although this time around, I think, a lot more of us should have seen it coming. “Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them” (9:12).

We are in a time of calamity. We are all snared by history, to varying degrees, and we have a choice between picking picayune quarrels with others and lifting up our heads to see the net. No, a hashtagged resistance will not suffice, and yes, we need to be discerning about whose activist counsel we follow. We will still need nuance in our leaders, and authenticity, and the real-world credibility that is built mostly offline. But the people spouting advice on Instagram are often the same people who are organizing the local protest, or the food drive, or the sit-in at the office of the

senator poised to vote us toward another human rights violation. The folks with a penchant for platitudes are likely to be the ones organizing against the mass deportations, the book bans, the attacks on journalists. So what if the quality of the poetry is dubious if it gets our asses off the couch?

I'm bracing myself for the next few months of book proposals, as there's certain to be a raft of them. I also plan to keep rereading Ecclesiastes, which reflects back my own sanctimonious ennui, my arrogant acedia, and reminds me that vanity is another face of despair.

I'm going to keep thinking, too, about the space between resignation and endurance. My mother-in-law's method for living in a time loop—"just endure"—might sound like resignation. But it's not. We simply cannot resign ourselves to whatever happens next. Like Dorothy during one of her fits, we should rage and shake our fists. We should pontificate and agitate and resist fascism even if it includes chanting and swearing. And we should learn from resistance movements of the past, so that "what has been is what will be" sounds less like foreboding and more like hope.

Yet we have no choice but to endure. "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them," James Baldwin writes. We're birds caught in the snare of last week—and the month and the year and the century before that.

So we're going to have to endure the next four years. We'll have to endure our neighbors who voted in an autocrat, and we'll have to remember that all of them bear the image of God, including even the charlatan who took them across.

But we're also going to have to endure each other, including those whose rhetoric or aesthetic may rub us the wrong way but with whom we must join energies and effort. Caught by the cruel net of history, we will need to pray, as the old hymn says, to be saved from weak resignation to the evils we deplore. In this time of calamities, in which the same damn thing just happened again, we may also need to be saved from our own petty vanities.