Issue 1: Letter from The Editors



Image by Joel Rosenburg

“All religions, perhaps, began as crisis cults, the response of society to problems the contemporary culture failed to solve.”

-Weston LeBarre

When we started planning our first issue of The Flood, the barrage of natural disasters that marked the summer of 2017 had not yet begun. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, Katia, and Maria (among others) which devastated the Caribbean and Gulf Coast, record flooding across Southeast Asia that left a third of Bangladesh underwater, and some of the largest forest fires in US history on the West Coast were not yet on our minds. But from the beginning we’ve been thinking about the drastic changes predicted for our climate as a result of global warming.

Over the past few decades, we’ve only just begun to understand the potential impacts of global warming, and have started to witness its first effects. As we’ve learned more about the unique cascading effects of greenhouse gas emissions on global temperatures, the range of potential futures projected by climate scientists has taken a drastic turn. In 2014, (LINK https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/20/science/the-melting-isnt-glacial.html

) researchers warned that, “the melt [of glaciers] in West Antarctica is irreversible.” According to climatologists, we had crossed a crucial tipping point: even if there were a concerted global effort to immediately halt worldwide carbon emissions, we would still likely see a four foot sea level rise within the next few centuries.

Two years later, new studies [LINK https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/science/global-warming-antarctica-ice-sheet-sea-level-rise.html] suggested that this could happen much sooner. Rapid melting of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet combined with ice melt from other sources (mountain tops and other polar regions) might cause as much as five or six feet of sea level rise by the end of *this* century. This newer research projected that if melting spread to the East Antarctic ice sheet, we could see up to 43 feet of sea level rise by the year 2500, from Antarctic melt alone. A sea level rise of this magnitude would entirely redraw coastlines around the world, wiping dozens of the world’s most populous cities off the map.

In April, New York Magazine published an article [LINK http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html] by David Wallace-Wells that urged readers to take a closer look at what some of these projected futures would really look like. “No matter how well-informed you are,” the article begins, “you are surely not alarmed enough.” The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently projected that if current warming trends persist, we will likely see 4 degrees of warming. This is the median projection; upper end projections went as high as 8 degrees. “The last time the planet was even four degrees warmer” Wallace-Wells writes, “the oceans were hundreds of feet higher.” Still, “fears of sea-level rise,” he argues, “are barely scratching the surface of what terrors are possible, even within the lifetime of a teenager today.” The article warns that “fleeing the coastline will not be enough,” and that, “absent a significant adjustment to how billions of humans conduct their lives, parts of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century.” Of the five mass extinctions studied in the geological record, “each so complete a slate-wiping of the evolutionary record it functioned as a resetting of the planetary clock,” four were caused not by asteroids but by “climate change produced by greenhouse gas.” Wallace-Wells compares “the most notorious” of these, which took place 252 million years ago, to our current situation:

It began when carbon warmed the planet by five degrees, accelerated when that warming triggered the release of methane in the Arctic, and ended with 97 percent of all life on Earth dead. We are currently adding carbon to the atmosphere at a considerably faster rate; by most estimates, at least ten times faster.

Drawing on lengthy interviews with “many sober-minded scientists… the most credentialed and tenured in the field, few of them inclined to alarmism,” the article paints a series of grim portraits of the near future. It describes the warming-related threats of heat death, food shortage, climate plagues, unbreathable air, perpetual war, permanent economic collapse, and poisoned oceans, and concludes with a reflection on our inability to see the reality of the situation we now face.

Our current state of denial – both outright denial of climate change and more subtle denials of its urgency – may one day be seen as the defining characteristic of this era. Watching popular culture in the US begin to casually acknowledge the situation over the past few years has been surreal. The hosts of The View recently discussed Stephen Hawking’s prediction that the human race has less than 100 years to live on Earth before neatly segueing into questions about a much more pleasant (and incompatible) future in which the most pressing moral dilemma involves sex-bots that look like real people [LINK https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucU29prJNRU] The New York Times Sunday Styles recently ran a sardonic guide to fashion for the apocalypse [LINK https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/23/style/how-to-survive-the-apocalypse.html] which advised, “the first thing you want to reach for – after the Xanax – is a well-stocked ‘bug-out’ bag.” And many people seem to be doing mental gymnastics to find comfort in projects like Space X [LINK http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/amyrose-lane/private-space-companies\_b\_8821120.html] , which aims to colonize Mars, despite the fact that it’s chances of success are slim and its pool of participants would be a miniscule group of the global ultra-rich.

Meanwhile it remains those least responsible for global warming, the worlds most economically impoverished, who will first and most severely feel the effects of climate change. “The poorest half of the global population – around 3.5 billion people,” according to Oxfam International, [link https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf] “are responsible for only around 10% of total global emissions attributed to individual consumption, yet live overwhelmingly in the countries most vulnerable to climate change.” Citizens of Pacific Island nations were told long ago to abandon hope of saving their ancestral lands. Others in tropical and low-lying coastal regions are already living in environments that resemble the dystopias predicted by climate scientists.

There is a felt absurdity to going about our everyday lives. If we carry on with life as usual, not only are we working towards futures that are almost certainly being undercut by the looming environmental crisis, but we’re directly contributing to greenhouse gas emissions which ensure that very crisis. Still, the relentless demands of life inside capitalism insist that we attend to its many manufactured crises on an individual level – paying debts, rents, grocery bills and generally making ends meet – before finding the time to consider a collective catastrophe like the one we now face. It’s hard to know what else to do, how else to live.

In *Cruel Optimism*, social theorist and professor of English at the University of Chicago Lauren Berlant refers to this experience of perpetually navigating the urgency of modern life as the “crisis ordinary.” She likens it to the feeling of treading water or, more precisely, to not drowning. It’s life “amid the breaking up of modernity’s secure institutions of intimacy and reciprocity,” amid the, “attrition of a fantasy” once known as, “the good life.” She writes:

“…the shrinkage of the social welfare state, the privatization of what had once been publicly held utilities and institutions, the increase in state, banking, and corporate pension insecurity, and the ever more ‘flexible’ practices of contractual reciprocity between owners and workers which ostensibly keeps business nimble and more capable of responding to market demand. Add to this the global transformation of unions from a force driving forward security and upward mobility to administrative entities managing workers’ decreasing legitimacy for claims-making on profit and security, and you get a broad picture of the neoliberal feedback loop, with its efficiency at distributing and shaping the experience of insecurity throughout the class structure and across the globe.”

Berlant refers to all people “whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms,” who are experiencing “the precarious universal of the neoliberal moment,” as a new global class: “the precariat.” Precarity has always been familiar to the oppressed and disenfranchised, but in the growing instability of our historical moment Berlant argues that “finally the wealthy are experiencing the material and sensual fragilities and unpredictability that have long been distributed to the poor and socially marginal.”

Each day the news offers stories that suggest this sense of precarity has become the norm. Incredible acts of terror, escalating nuclear tensions, more natural disasters, and mass migrations of refugees displaced by war, famine, and the changing climate. There is a growing sense that something has gone profoundly wrong, something that is no longer in our control. “The extraordinary,” writes Berlant, “always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works.”

In a legal sense, “precarious” refers to a state of tenancy in which the deed to your land or property is literally in someone else’s hands. The word is defined as the condition of being “vulnerable to the will or decision of others,” and it comes from the Latin *precarius*, the same root that gives us the word “prayer.”

This etymological link between prayer and precarity points to a deeper connection. Those most familiar with precarity have historically been the most embedded in a spiritual tradition. And those of us lucky enough to be relatively insulated from our own vulnerability find prayer resurfacing at moments of great precarity – in hospitals, hospices, and funeral homes. We turn to prayer in times of uncertainty and need, when we cannot help but recognize our own ultimate fragility. This relationship between prayer and precarity is at the very heart of religion, uniting otherwise disparate traditions.

As we look toward a future that seems more precarious than ever, we wonder if prayer – and religion in general – will play a more prominent role. How could it change the way we interact with one another and organize our lives? Can vastly different religious traditions find unity in the challenges we face? What does ancient wisdom have to offer to our modern crisis?

Some of the oldest stories we know tell of a great flood. Ancient myths from hundreds of religious and cultural traditions share remarkably similar stories. Torrential rains, divine anger, rivers breaking their banks and spreading over the land, waters streaming out from cracks in the earth, tears pouring down from a grieving deity, waves lapping against mountain peaks, impossible volumes of water wiping out civilizations, animals and humans working together to survive, an arc, a bird or turtle or fish searching for signs of land, all culminating in the narrow survival of planetary life. In these stories we see ultimate examples of prayer and precarity. People fearing annihilation become aware of their size and their dependence on the creatures and landscape surrounding them. We see people calling out to something greater than themselves, remembering connections long forgotten, mourning unimaginable loss and finding an unexpected reverence for the eerie beauty of destruction.

For a long time now, we haven’t taken myths very seriously. We prefer to put our faith in rational tools like historical records and empirical data. But as we learn more about the current environmental crisis, myths that once seemed fantastic are beginning to look familiar – less like imagined history and more like prophecy. The same tools that once dismissed the oldest stories in the world are now predicting a great flood.