

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Between Aftershocks

Robin Grearson · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

1.

An earthquake starts—at least if you live in the kind of apartments that I have almost always lived in—with a crack. When you hear the sound of a 2×4 giving way you know the crack is not a self-contained *snap!* but a clap calling you to attention for what follows, the commencement of waiting for thunder after lightning. The problem is that you do not know if this is the beginning of fighting for or losing your life, the beginning of losing your home or perhaps only some glassware. Most certainly you grasp that, for this reason, even the smallest earthquakes are emergencies during the moments you are living them. They are emergencies inside your bodies caused by the lack of control over an event of indefinite duration and so while the earth is releasing volatile tension, you are the living energy that is receiving it. Like the walls of your home, your task in this moment is to absorb shock without breaking.

The earth knew this would happen sooner or later and so did you, maybe. But right now, you are swept along by adrenaline, fight-or-flight reflexes considering how to contend with your own disordering. By the time you are thinking these thoughts if the earthquake has not stopped it has begun to sound like a train is passing just beyond your wall, followed by what sounds like more cracking. Your body rightly takes these signals as the threats they are.

Most of the earthquakes you feel are not “the one,” and after a few of them you learn to realize even while an earthquake continues that your home will probably not fall down today, and your responses settle, a little. Now you brace yourself, mentally but also physically, perhaps in a doorway or in your bathtub or under a table, and wait. This is no time to be thoughtless because this is endurable, the sun will rise and you will see it and most likely so will everyone around you. You are in dialogue with nothing less than the earth asserting itself—and it has never displayed a temperament for reason or bargaining. This connects you to your neighbors in a way that makes you feel something like shared euphoria as feelings of compression start to ease. You become aware that almost everyone you see that day has had the same thoughts in the same sequence, which makes earthquakes uniquely communal. You are reminded we are connected and you are reminded more particularly that you are alive, because you have just lived what the beginning of a death might feel like and now you are sitting on your couch again. This ride has ended at approximately the top of a rollercoaster.

2.

I am related to someone who almost died and what happened was that a surgery did not go well that we all hoped would go well and not to get into the details, but there were emergency flights booked and boarded and days spent drinking coffee in waiting rooms, in meetings in conference rooms looking at X-rays and other scans and waiting to see if someone we loved would wake up or not wake up and if she woke up, in what condition would she be? And then at night there was drinking, but not very much, because of exhaustion.

What you are doing while you are waiting to find out something, even if you are waiting for weeks, is you are sitting inside a long earthquake and as the earth is changing itself it is changing you without your consent. When you don't know which way things are going to go and your body struggles to absorb the sudden violence of disruption even though the event that set off all of the turbulence has actually happened to someone else you are, again, a receiver. Things won't stay this way forever, cannot stay this way, which suggests that this particular event will end soon, but there is no hint of which direction it is heading. So while this earthquake is rearranging your life, you are looking for those cues. You just want to know all the things that are unknowable. Please.

During an earthquake the crack is the starting pistol and if there are more cracks you know things are going the wrong way. What is equivalent to the sounds of wood splintering and shearing here is the sound of your phone. During nights curled up on a faraway couch while others are sealed up in sleeping bags you are always waiting for news, even if it is bad and even if it doesn't come, since that is also news. You will be at the hospital sometimes by 6 AM and so if you wake up at 5:30 the first thing you become aware of is that a phone did not ring in the night. The emergency shall proceed, and this is a small source of joy. Perhaps today will be good. There is an idea that begins to form: every day that the worst has not happened means the earthquake has declared itself, is telling you everything will be okay, that this is not "the one." That is not what the passage of time actually means, but getting through another day, it can feel that way, if that is what you tell each other and if you say it with enough conviction. Your body believes you because the chaos it is processing has slowed down.



3.

In a time of dread and vigilance you find a way to live while suspended inside unknowing. Time is measured according to a God who seems to be seated in the waiting room with you and your family but who does not show you anything but tricks. There was the day the doctor told you a story about rising above the trees, clearing the trees was his big metaphor and it summed up test results we didn't understand or that weren't yet going entirely the way he wanted, so always the next test or the next surgical procedure perhaps might reveal signal in the noise, would show him our plane was flying above the trees.

You were on the phone with the doctor listening to him tell you about the plane when you saw the rainbow rising, rising, rising, right there in front of you. And yes, it lifted above the tree line. It was absurd and as you broke into tears he kept talking and you gestured to someone else to—quickly!—take that picture at the window of the rainbow, *please*, and you will explain later. You explain the trees but not the rainbow, because you had already told the story of how your grandmother had once announced, delighted with herself, that she would come back as a rainbow. You were reluctant to say you believed in something so foolish, but now you are emboldened to mention it; this is no time for doubts. You are willing to be the loopy one who wishes on rainbows

and butterflies because there is no down side. You could now tell the doctor with photographs that there must be a miracle under way, as if his belief has anything to do with staging the course of things. You cling to the rainbow.

There are other symbols that are nothing to you but something to someone or something to you and nothing to someone else—a grasshopper appears on the window even though you are on the fifth floor, someone sees a helicopter that stabs them with memory, butterflies—everyone knows butterflies are your dead mother’s spirit reincarnated, including the person in the bed down the hall. These glimpses of life living itself are our shared prayers of hope.

The others with you in the waiting room make photo collages, signs, tell stories, cry, write letters: the work of waiting. Also there are fights and by the time you heard the crack it was too late: the rollercoaster descends, then derails. Its force shatters heirlooms that no glue can repair. You spend days staring at your laptop, learn your way around the hospital campus; others pace laps outside it while you mostly remain frozen, cocoon-like, because you don’t know what to brace yourself for, or when to stop, and now you are alone. This earthquake is no longer communal. Some begin to leave and come back—a day here, a weekend there. Mostly you stay. Finally the miracle comes, the person wakes up. The details of that belong to her but I can tell you this, after some time she went home and eventually I did, too.

4.

When the ground stops moving the earthquake is not officially, geologically over. The time between the earthquake and any of its thousands of possible aftershocks feels calm but is only relatively so. Aftershocks occur, says Wiki, “as the displaced crust adjusts to the effects of the main shock.” The stillness is only a space between the last shock and the next. This is the time to inspect your foundation, check for wounds. If you are going to break do it now, but don’t take too long. It’s possible the next quake will not be smaller but larger, may last even longer.

You live inside a casual lie to fall asleep, find a rhythm based on the pretext that there is no such thing as next time. It’s not that the next shock is no longer coming, but it did not come today. The fiction holds stray parts of you together, like tape.

Your body responds to what’s been lost by listening for the snap. You wake up at 5 AM out of habit so you’re in bed by 10, but when the landlord walks his dog at 2 AM you hear the footsteps as they pass your window. As you sleep an unconscious alertness stands guard: It will pull you from the middle of a dream to ask, Does that clicking of paws sound like a crack, to you?

Waiting for an emergency is life braced for impact, out of phase in the calm and it does not work. What is not resilient cannot withstand great shock. You think of those broken things you could not fix and wonder what is worth saving, what you could have done better to protect yourself from everything that breaks. You find no shield. Whatever you try to believe about the quiet, you know it is a matter of when—that there is no way to know how much time you have between the aftershocks. A life braced for impact is out of phase with the calm, does not build the resilience you need to survive. Eventually you set your phone to Do Not Disturb. Not because you are convinced the shock is ended, but because if a call comes in the middle of the night, you will need your rest to face it in the morning.

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