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Facing Increasingly Frequent Storms of Wind, Rain, Fire – and Bullets

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Facing Increasingly Frequent Storms of Wind, Rain, Fire – and Bullets

By Lisa Roney

UCF Forum columnist

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Sometimes a particular season takes on a character of its own. Often we don't notice until years or decades later that phenomena such as Freedom Summer (1964) and the Summer of Love (1967)—though they also may be traced to identifiable human causes—seemed simply to emerge out of the air.

Today, I write after a horrible few weeks of destruction and death that has washed over the headlines in waves: hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria; the Eagle Creek, La Tuna, Milli, and dozens of other fires all over the West (more than a hundred, according to the National Interagency Fire Center); monsoons and earthquakes that devastated our brethren in Mexico and Asia; and, now, another gun massacre.

Closer to home, my friend's kitten had a bad reaction to her vaccinations and nearly died, and the brother of an acquaintance was nearly killed in a car accident. It's uncertain whether the feline or the man will walk again. On top of the personal pain and suffering, we are confused by how their treatment should be paid for—by individuals, by families and friends, by charity, by the veterinarian, by the vaccination companies, by insurance, by Medicaid, by lawsuit. All of that argument will convey to those already suffering.

We have taken around my house and office to referring to this as a Season from Hell. My 82-year-old mother told me that she has not felt this kind of restless, disturbed energy in the air since 1968, when we lived in Memphis, Tenn., before and after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. That period of perturbation, however, had an insistent goal that provided an optimistic energy in spite of cruel and violent setbacks.

We don't seem to have that kind of clear direction or faith in our power as individuals to affect the destination any more. Yes, we know that global warming contributes to our increasingly bizarre weather, and we know that mental illness and male rage and gun possession are concomitantly on the rise leading to an-all-too-common toxic combination. But there is a way in which even those of us who feel certain about our positions on these issues don't know what to do about them.

A large part of this stems from the fact that no one trusts anyone anymore. No matter what side of the issues we are on personally, one thing that we all share is a sense of mistrust. Partly this results from the complexity of the issues and choices facing us today and the lack of immediacy in the results of our social actions. That's a problem we can change only by continuing to try to stay informed, to be open to learning, and to take responsibility for doing so.

The other problem, of course, goes by a variety of names, most often "fake news." We have lost faith that even leaders and public spokespeople we agree with are telling the truth. We don't trust the facts, much less their interpretations. We exist in our bubbles of self-fulfilling "information," but we all suspect that we are being manipulated. We don't just suspect it; we *know* it.

Today, we suffer from a variety of crises—global warming and human violence are two of these—but the way that we communicate is another. Since 1938, the Federal Trade Commission has provided some protection against corporate lying in advertising. However, other kinds of communication (including many political ads and much of today's "journalism") frequently hew to no such line. Free speech is legally sanctioned under the First Amendment, subject to the laws of libel, obscenity, sedition, etc. But our standards for truth are fundamentally a matter of expectation and practice, and those break down from time to time. It may be some small comfort to remember that we have gone through periods of fake news before—like the "yellow journalism" scourge of the 1890s.

In my humble English-teacher mind, however, I also see us shifting away from another significant avenue to understanding of other people and other *types* of people, and that is "realistic" literature and the practice of reading it. More and more, our tastes turn toward a) fantasy and b) movies and shows instead of words on a page (electronic or print). We tend to want to escape more and more into a world that doesn't resemble ours except in the most abstract and symbolic ways, and one that leaves little to the imagination, where every part is played with a specific beautiful face.

This is a completely unpopular opinion and admittedly oversimplified. I just know that it was when I read Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* that I imagined my nation without my forbears in it and saw that it was good. When I lingered over Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, I felt slavery in a way that allowed me time to incorporate its wrongs into my bones. When I read Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" and Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," I felt sympathy for how basic kinds of white guys struggle with their identities, too.

In all the questions and laments about not knowing what to do in the face of so much tragedy, I would say that, along with whatever praying, hoping, donating, direct aid, political action, and other efforts you may make, try reading a book about someone without magical powers. Remember what it is to take the time to care about our very real and plenty strange world. Remember how it is to be someone else. I know you know how.

People lived through the Fall of the Roman Empire. To them, it probably felt like a Season from Hell that went on and on.

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