

**“Things Fall Apart” April 3, 2011**  
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“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”<sup>1</sup>

The Irish poet Yeats wrote these words in the aftermath of the First World War. Europe seemed to have descended into chaos. Yeats saw in this “widening gyre,” evidence of the coming apocalypse. The falcon (we) could no longer hear the commands of the falconer (God.) Anarchy, entropy ruled, was “loosed upon the world” along with the “blood-dimmed tide.”

How sadly apt is this latter phrase, “the blood-dimmed tide,” in light of the Japanese tsunami and the horrifying repercussions that have followed.

And how sadly eloquent in its simplicity is the stark statement: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” This describes how I, at least, have felt at moments during this past month. Perhaps you have, too.

Fortunately, we are so made that we cannot sustain this apprehension of chaos for long. We reimpose our little systems of order and control, as illusory as they may be.

We cannot live for long in a state of crisis. Our own systems will not bear it. For sanity and survival, we eventually block out the threat, accustom ourselves to it, or succumb to madness. Order reasserts itself. It may be a new kind of order; one that has shifted to accommodate new information, new losses, or even new horrors, but it is still a kind of order. This is the law of life: It does go on. We do learn to live with new realities, new expectations, a new grasp of what is “normal.” Thank goodness for this inherent ability to adapt. And yet, in the meantime... How do we bridge the chasm that, from time to time, opens under our feet? That threatens to suck us down into chaos? How do we live when things fall apart and the center fails to hold?

Let me show you what I mean by telling you a bit about my month, this month just past. Maybe March felt this way to you, too. Or maybe some other month, some other year, has felt like this. I’d be willing to bet that you, like me, have experienced such times when things at least **seemed** to be falling apart. When a series of events threatened to send you heading for the covers, to bury your head under the pillow, at least figuratively. You oversleep, you slip in the bathtub and your car won’t start – all in the space of an hour. Or your spouse gets ill, your child gets arrested and your boss announces layoffs, all within a week. On a small scale or a large one, this is a common human phenomenon.

For me, the month started with the death of Pookie. Pookie was my roommate’s cat, a funny and lovely little feline drama queen, five pounds of attitude. She loved people, but when it came to other cats, like my own, she carried a chip on her furry little shoulder as big as she was. If Pookie had had a gun and even one opposable thumb, we all would have been in trouble. Pookie died of cancer – a cancer we didn’t know she had. Tough character that she was, she never let on. That was on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.

That same week, my sister Ann discovered her housemate had died in the night. Barb was a kind and generous person you may have met at one of our Christmas Eve services. Ann discovered the body when Barb’s wolfhounds came to her door that morning to complain that Barb hadn’t let them out. The coroner was called. I rushed out to Placerville, and we began

making lists of what needed to be done. Chaos asserts itself; we respond with lists. Things to do. Define a new reality.

Then came the news of the earthquake. Not just a regular earthquake, but one that shifted the earth on its axis, moved the ground we stood on figuratively as well as literally. An earthquake whose seismic action was measured around the world. Thousands still missing.

Then the tsunami. The horrifying images and stories of people trying to outrun the racing wall of water. More dead; more missing.

Then the nuclear reactors. Core meltdowns, heroic workers pumping in sea water to cool them, wading through radioactive water; evacuations, but not enough. Infants being scanned with Geiger counters; parents in shelters without children, children without parents. And always, the threat of what might come next. The uncertainty about whether officials were giving us the whole story. Radioactive spinach, and milk. The questions about long-term consequences for the people, for the water, the air, the soil and the ocean.

Then, following the jubilant victories for democracy in the Middle East, news that the military in Egypt was not acting as benignly as we'd hoped. Again, people arrested and tortured. The Arab Spring was not going to be quite the happy tale it started out to be. Kaddafi attacking his people with tanks and missiles and land mines. The NATO forces step in. We know what that means. More American advisors, weapons, air support... Can another Iraq be on the horizon? A just cause, but what, we wonder, will be the cost? To America, to Libya, to the region, and the world?

And the budget. Teacher layoffs, social services cut, programs for the most vulnerable among us put on hold, until when? And no solution in sight.

And the rain. Rain and more rain... Route 1 near Big Sur falls into the ocean. Creeks overflow their banks and parks and roadways become lakes and rivers. My sister digs a trench in her yard to keep the water from her front door while trees fall in the parking lot of my apartment complex. Rain and still more rain. This was March. How was it for you?

What do you do?

You take time to grieve. You weep and gnash your teeth.

You turn off the TV, the news, for awhile at least, if you have to. You grieve some more.

You notice the small moments when you hear the mourning dove in the gray twilight. When the streetlights shimmer in the mist. When the ground is carpeted with blossoms not yet turned to rot.

You do what you can. You send in a donation, bake some bread, read a poem, or write one. Put your feelings on paper, or on your computer. Pray, if that's what you do. Work, if you can. Call someone, tell a joke, tell someone you love them.

You give thanks that you have a home and the roof doesn't leak. You give thanks for the levees and those who maintain them. You wait. You know spring is here and the sun will shine again. And it does. Over and over and over. You give thanks again and again.

Physicists understand it this way: They call it entropy. Here what they say:

Traditionally, 20th century textbooks have introduced entropy as "a measurement of the disorder or randomness of a system". It has been argued that ambiguities in the terms used (such as "disorder" and "chaos") contribute to widespread confusion.... A more recent formulation describes entropy as measuring "the spontaneous dispersal of energy..."

The major revolution in the last decade is the recognition of the "law of maximum entropy production" or "MEP" and with it an expanded view of thermodynamics showing that the spontaneous production of order from disorder is the expected consequence of basic laws."<sup>ii</sup>

Entropy, when things fall apart and the center seemingly cannot hold – looks like chaos. But the laws of physics, the laws of life, eventually bring order from disorder. "This is the expected consequence of basic laws." A new reality, a different order, but an order prevails... every morning, every moment. Remember that.

So love, let us be true to one another.<sup>iii</sup> The promise of life is in our hearts. We carry it there like the treasure it is, and in our daily lives, we share it. We speak that promise to one another, silently or aloud. For no one of us is alone; not ever. We are part of an order so vast, so mysterious, that no one of us can see it whole – the order of the universe. We catch glimpses of it from time to time and remember that it does not depend on us alone. We do our tiny part, our crucial part because the outcome, the picture in its smallest detail, will not be the same without us.

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<sup>i</sup> "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.entropylaw.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold