

WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Finding Courage and Compassion
When Cruelty Is Trending



JOHN PAVLOVITZ

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—Thom Hartmann, *New York Times*
best-selling author and progressive
talk show host

“John’s new book is an inspiring call to action for anyone who wants to learn how to tap into their humanity and help repair our turbulent and troubled world. With wisdom and insight, John ignites the spark of hope, urging us all to stand up, speak out, and push back against the tide of cruelty currently washing over all of us.”

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“John Pavlovitz is one of those people who reminds you there’s still good in the world. When cruelty becomes popular, love becomes brave, and it’s writing like this that inspires the courage we need to come together and fix what’s broken. I feel deeply grateful for this book.”

—Leigh McGowan, PoliticsGirl

“John is truly a national treasure. His kindhearted, compassionate words here provide support and wisdom for good people working for a better world. This book is a work of art.”

—Lindy Li, political commentator
and strategist

*This book is lovingly dedicated to Jen, Noah, and Selah—
and to the lovers, helpers, healers, activists, caregivers,
and damn-givers who believe there is always
something and someone worth fighting for. Be encouraged.*

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INTRODUCTION

STEP INTO THE RING

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but since I pride myself on saying stuff that needs to be said, let's get this out of the way right at the jump: pretty soon we're not going to be here. We're all goners, every one of us. You, me, the people we adore, the people we despise, those passing us in traffic, those we scroll past on our timelines, the people half a foot away and half a world away—we're all hopelessly temporary. Sure, we're each doing our level best to valiantly bob and weave here in the ring, dodging mortality's blows, but barring some serious medical advances, death is and will remain undefeated. In a breathtaking flash, our time here will have expired and we'll cease to be, and in a few decades our names and achievements will eventually fade from collective memory, largely swallowed up by time and progress. We can (and probably should) debate the elusive mysteries and promising possibilities of the afterlife another time. But this life? Ticktock, friend, it's a whole lot later than you think.

I'm pretty sure I don't need to tell you this. While many people spend their lives avoiding the reality of their impending nonexistence, numbing it with sensory distractions, retail therapy, and TV binges, you're probably not one of them. I'm guessing you're here because you aren't a stranger to existential crises or the examined life. I imagine you feel the urgency of these days and the terrifying velocity at which they're all flying by. You want it all to matter. You want *you* to matter. And because you do, I wanted to make sure not to bury the lede today: yeah, pretty soon you're not going to be here—but you are here now.

That's fairly big news. You're present for this day, and it wasn't a guarantee that you would be. Lots of people who were here yesterday aren't anymore, but you are. That story should be the all-caps, bold-type headline in your head, but it's probably been crowded out by trending disasters on your timeline, by relational implosions you're enduring, by the length of your to-do list, by last-minute middle school projects, by unscheduled water leaks, by fender benders in the office parking lot, or by the unexpected horror upon seeing yourself in the grocery store self-checkout camera feed. It's quite likely that you've been so overwhelmed by the tasks, appointments, worries, and obligations in front of you and the fatigue of carrying it all that you've forgotten you're alive. I want you to stop for a second and remember: press your thumb firmly into your wrist until you feel the blood pulsing fiercely beneath it. Pause and notice the rise and fall of your chest, as shallow and rapid as it might be today. Be fully aware of the sights and sounds and scents around you. And when you've reconfirmed that you're alive, ask yourself why you live: who or what is still worth spending yourself on behalf of.

I don't know your *why*; I just know that you have one: a burden you carry, a cause that grips you, a dream that you can't shake, a hill worth dying on, a face across from you in the living room. You have some nagging, defiant part of you that refuses to quit despite all the experiential evidence that you should. This is the reason this book exists: to remember how much is still worth fighting for. A rapidly heating planet being swallowed up by unchecked gluttony is worth it. A fractured nation teetering precariously on the edge of implosion is worth it. An American church that is poisoned with white supremacy and devoid of Jesus is worth it. The human and civil rights rapidly evaporating around us are worth it. Already-vulnerable people driven by their leaders to the limits of what the human heart can endure are worth it. Your treasured relationships that are pushed to within inches of disintegration are worth it. Most of all, the brave but exhausted human being staring back at you in

the mirror who easily forgets how much their presence changes this place is worth it. So much is worth the fight—and as people of the common good, we cannot willingly cede any of it. We can't let the sun set on this day without doing everything we can to save the things worth saving.

Recently, I asked my social media followers what gives them hope right now. A myriad of reasonable and predictable replies came back: children, grandchildren, spouses, partners, meaningful work, food, sex, laughter, music—and dogs (lots and lots of dogs). There was an unsettling pattern to many of the responses too. Despite every breakdown of our election processes, legislative safeguards, and constitutional protections over the past few years and despite being perpetually let down and betrayed by elected officials and church leaders and federal judges, far too many people are still inexplicably waiting for saviors and superheroes to save them.

“I have faith that God will make things right.”

“I believe that love wins.”

“I trust that goodness will persevere.”

The prevailing wisdom still seems to be that love and God and “someone out there” are going to save the day. I wish it were that simple. I wish it were that cheap and clean a proposition: offer up some skyward prayers or make a public floodlight appeal to the heavens and wait for inevitable rescue. That's not how this is going to work.

No, contrary to the T-shirts and memes, love will not win on its own simply because. Courageous people armed with love, fully participating in the political process and relentlessly engaging the broken systems around them, will win. Whenever empathetic, courageous human beings spend themselves on behalf of other people, when they keep going despite being exhausted, when they refuse to tire of doing the right thing, when they will not be shamed into silence—then love will be winning. Love isn't some mysterious force outside of our grasp and beyond our efforts that exists apart from us. It is the tangible cause and effect of giving a damn about our

families, neighbors, strangers and exercising that impulse in measurable ways. Love isn't real until it moves from aspiration to incarnation.

And all apologies to the theists and deists, but God is not going to magically make things right either. That's not part of the deal. People of faith, morality, and conscience who are moved with a ferocity for humanity born of their convictions and propelled by their beliefs are going to need to move in order to make right all that is so terribly wrong. They're going to have to sacrifice sleep or relationships or comfort in order to step into the messy, jagged trenches of this f*cked-up day and unf*ck it. We are the imperfect angels who get to bring the good tidings of great joy.

And we know from our friends in politics that thoughts and prayers alone aren't fixing this mess either. What will alter the story we find ourselves in is prayerful people who reflect fully on the fractures and the malignancies and injustices in front of them—and decide they will change what they can change and do what they are able to do. Heaven will come down as ordinary mortals endeavor to be the answer to as many of their prayers as possible. That's not to say that there aren't things working beyond what we can see and measure and quantify, but it means that we are able to do physical things (help and heal and give and protest and volunteer and canvass and vote) and if we do those physical things—then we will at least be able to rest in the mysteries, knowing we did all that we could with what we were entrusted with.

God isn't going to ensure that our schools are safe for LGBTQ children.

Love isn't going to make assault weapons less available on our streets.

Jesus isn't going to secure our elections to prevent wannabe dictators from taking power.

Love isn't going to legislate protections for the planet and the poor and the marginalized.

God isn't going to dismantle the systemic racism still afflicting our nation.

Jesus isn't coming to shut down social media disinformation and make our neighbors wiser to Fox News fakery.

Love isn't going to push back against anti-immigrant bigotry.

You and I are, whether we are compelled by love or God or simply an acute sickness in our stomachs that will not let us rest.

Human beings fighting like hell together for the common good will do all those things. This is why I'm here and why I hope you're here.

Today, instead of looking to the sky and waiting for a pastor or a politician or some invisible force to come in and dramatically beat back the darkness—you wield the brilliant light in your possession. Maybe you're the hero you've been waiting for. Maybe you're the answer to your urgent prayers. Maybe hope isn't in the sky, maybe it's in the mirror. Yeah, the less-than-ideal news is that pretty soon you'll be gone. The beautiful news is that you're here now. The bell's been rung, and the ring is yours. Fight well.



Fighting for the stuff that matters isn't for the faint of heart. If courage and compassion were easy, we'd experience a lot more of them in the world. Throughout this book, you'll find these "training sessions" to help you clarify your thoughts, wrestle with important questions, and craft practical and attainable responses so that you can move from the abstract into the fray.

Keep breathing, stay hydrated, and fight well!

PART I

WARNING LIGHTS



“How long has this light been on?” I asked my teenage son, after tossing down the keys to the car I once owned but have since gradually been evicted from.

“I’m not sure,” he matter-of-factly replied without raising his head from his phone.

“So, a few hours, a day, a couple of weeks, what?” I asked, hoping elevated volume and more precise inquiries would cause him to share my urgency.

The unconcerned, still barely audible response came back: “Hmm, I don’t know.”

Then, almost magically in a kind of “circle-of-life” moment, I heard the voice of my dearly departed father burst from my mouth as I involuntarily launched into an impassioned and eloquent soliloquy on the seemingly self-explanatory purpose of warning lights and the inherent dangers of not responding to them. I experienced secondhand déjà vu as my words perfectly replicated an ancient kitchen-table lecture my father had once given me, as had his father before him. Instantly, I’d become part of a proud parenting lineage tracing back to the very genesis of automobile notification systems. My frustration at my son’s incredulity was slightly tempered by the thought that one day a much older version of him might one day find himself similarly exasperated, fiercely interrogating an

adolescent who is as laissez-faire and unbothered as he seems to be in this moment. As I stormed out of the kitchen, I punctuated my diatribe with one final salvo: “The warning lights are there for a reason! Pay attention!” Pushing through the front door, I called the repair shop, hoping we could still save the car without me having to sell a kidney.

Truly, nothing is new under the sun for the intricate and delicate vehicles you and I are inhabiting here on this meandering, unpredictable journey of being human. We ignore the warnings and alarms within us all the time. Physical fatigue comes, and instead of slowing down, cutting back, or—God forbid—taking a nap, we down another cup of coffee or energy drink hoping to buy just enough of an artificial turbo boost to thrust us back into the day for a few more hours. Or we feel a sustained anxiousness residing within us, and rather than attending to it by pausing to breathe or seeing a therapist or journaling the angst away, we double down, betting on a slot machine refreshing of our social media feed to suddenly raise our emotional reserves and temporarily pull us out of our prolonged funk. Or perhaps our partner points out our recent emotional unavailability and we grow defensive or rationalize away their assessment in an attempt to avoid admitting that we’ve been sedated by a daily toxic cocktail of bad news, outrage addiction, and cultivated worry. When it comes to engaging the brokenness around us, there is a fragile line between noble perseverance and careless hubris—and it’s an hourly, almost momentary task to stay on the right side of the danger zone. If you’re here, you may be well in the red.

As we go about the work of being compassionate human beings in days when cruelty is trending, there are two wounds we need to be constantly mindful of and sensitive to: *the wounds of the world* and *the wounds we sustain attending to them*. The former are usually much better at getting our attention than the latter are. The very empathy that enables us to notice the pain in our path makes us vulnerable to injury as we travel it. It causes us to have proximity to other people’s trauma, and we cannot enter those places unscathed. The best we can do

is to pay attention to the signs and mitigate the damage, and we're going to need to slow down in order to do that. There is a stillness that is both necessary and elusive if we want to stay compassionate for the long haul.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

We do so much, we run so quickly, the situation is difficult, and many people say, "Don't just sit there, do something."

But doing more things may make the situation worse. So, you should say, "Don't just do something, sit there." Sit there, stop, be yourself first, and begin from there.

We're so used to mistaking activity for productivity that Hanh's advice might feel counterintuitive at first, yet slowing our pace might be where the wisdom is. Sometimes, with so much pain vying for your attention and the perpetual whirlwind of panic it may be generating within you, perhaps the most important thing you can do for your health and for the world that needs you—is nothing.

It's difficult to quantify the physical and emotional toll of the collective hell we've all passed through in recent years, the heightened level of awareness that we've all had to sustain along the way. We're learning that trauma resides in our bodies, finding a home in our very physicality, but its impact is time-released, which makes it tricky to track. The effects on our systems often manifest down the road well beyond the initial injury. Sure, sometimes we can name precisely who and what the sources of our fatigue and anxieties presently are. More often, our assailants surface months or years later, shape-shifted into something else: a premature retirement, a stress-related heart episode, a marital collapse, a mental health emergency. We may not be able to run a tether directly from these things back to the tribalism and elevated urgency of a cancerous presidency and a planetary health crisis, but we should know it's all connected.

Ultimately, you are the greatest personal resource you have in the fight for a more compassionate planet. Dead people make really lousy activists. (I mean, that's about as inactive as

you can get.) Doing the work I do, I hear from far too many former empaths and ex damn-givers: lifetime optimists forced into early retirement by a decisive and cataclysmic health breakdown or from the slow, steady erosion of vigor. They were once full-throated and passionate revolutionaries now rendered silent and invisible, all because they've been hyper-aware of the trauma around them and oblivious to the trauma within them until it was too late. The fact that you're here tells me you're not quite there yet. Pay attention to those warning lights. This is fight one.

THE UPSIDE OF DESPAIR

Hopelessness is a waste.

It's useless.

It's powerless.

It's also contagious.

Friend, if you're feeling hopeless today, you're in good company.

For many of us, it's been a tall order lately to try and fend off the discouragement that seems unrelenting: too many emergencies for us to keep track of, too many wounds to attend to, too much bad news for our battered minds to contain, too much sadness to bear.

Sleep and rest have been hard to come by.

Joy seems in short supply.

Peace feels elusive.

Frustration comes easily.

I get it.

If your eyes are tired from scanning the horizon and straining to see something good off in the distance, do me a favor today and take a look in the mirror.

Are you grieving?

Are you angry?

Are you brokenhearted?

Are you pissed off?

Are you at the end of your rope?

Good.

This is cause for celebration.

These are signs that your heart is still functioning. They are your soul's alarms, telling you that things are not okay and that you are not okay because of it. It's also confirmation of that

precious ability to suffer greatly and still give a damn that has always sustained humanity in inhumane times.

Physical pain lets us know when our bodies have been damaged. Similarly, despair tells us when our spirits have incurred injury. Both are uncomfortable but necessary prompts to protect us from further damage, and they demand a response. These days demand one too.

Friend, right now everything in you that is so bruised and so tender and so broken is also the most powerful weapon on the planet. This is the catalytic fuel of revolution, and you have access to it. In days when things seem to make no sense, when darkness seems to have the upper hand, when we're overwhelmed by the prevalent wrong in our midst, we often lose hope because we wonder where the good people have gone.

This is your reminder that they haven't gone anywhere: here you are.

So yes, you're exhausted and you're pushed to the brink and you feel like you're a few bad moments from falling apart, but you're also right where you need to be to do what is needed in this moment. You have everything you need to begin altering the planet in the only place anyone ever can: the here, now, close, small, and doable.

Whether your greatest present burden is a political reality, a relational fracture, a financial challenge, a medical diagnosis, or a personal demon—you still have great agency in the decisions you make, the attitude you approach each day with, the way you use your time and your resources to reflect whatever it is you value.

You're here and able—and you're also not alone.

One of the lies hopelessness tells you is that you are the only one who is not okay with this; that you are the last remaining warrior for your cause and that surrender isn't only necessary and sensible—but inevitable. Refuse to believe this. As you read these very words, millions and millions of people are also similarly discouraged, convinced no one cares as much as they do that everything's gone sideways and wondering what to do right now.

The only way humanity loses is if decent human beings allow the inhumanity to win, if they stop fighting, if they resign themselves to their circumstances.

Hopelessness has never made the world more safe or just or beautiful—and it is of no use right now.

Anything else we can work with.

Anger can be redirected into something productive.

Outrage can be channeled into a useful response.

Grief can be transformed into goodness.

In days like these, nothing helpful can come from resignation.

The first step and the greatest victory today is simply in seeing that, yes, good people still inhabit this place and that you are one of them—and *that* is where the hope is.

Take a look in the mirror, friend.

See the grief on your face.

Feel the full depth of your sadness and be encouraged by it today.

Hear your heartbeat and know that while that is happening, so much is still possible.



Truth: We write the story in our heads.

Question: How often do you find yourself catastrophizing or going to the worst-case scenario, and how is that internal pessimism unhelpful?

Strategy: Continually be aware of the negative story you tell yourself and intentionally take note of people you know or are aware of who give a dissenting opinion about humanity.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS OF MAGA AMERICA

“I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

I hear these words a couple hundred times a day, in one form or another.

I read them in desperate social media outbursts.

I find them in my inbox from friends and from strangers.

I hear them in my own head.

They are the symptoms of a shared sickness, a sprawling, homegrown mental health crisis. They are part of a growing national neurosis brought on by a continual assault on decency and sanity and goodness by those in power.

Mental health is a daily battle, even on our best days.

During any given year in America, one in five adults¹ (approximately 57.8 million people) experiences mental illness—10 million of these people finding their lives fundamentally impacted by their internal, invisible maladies. The personal toll of these diseases is almost incalculable: debilitating mood disorders, propensity toward addiction, susceptibility to physical illness, and regular feelings of isolation and hopelessness. More than forty-eight thousand people die here by suicide² each year, with twenty-five attempts for each of these deaths. In any given moment, millions of people are fighting a battle in their own heads just to stay here.

This is all under normal circumstances—and these are not at all normal circumstances.

These are days that tax people’s already-burdened mental defense systems and emotional reserves, by relentlessly targeting their places of vulnerability:

The real and manufactured emergencies designed by the recent iteration of the Republican Party; the daily legislative

attacks on vulnerable people groups; the normalized acts of violence that MAGA conservatives not only tolerate but incite; the not-at-all-sane behavior in matters of national security, environmental stewardship, and human rights.

In other words, the GOP is unwell, and lots of good, already-hurting people see it clearly. They understand the gravity of these moments for our nation, and they are rightly terrified by the lack of accountability. Men and women already prone to depression and anxiety, often driven to despair even without extenuating circumstances, now also have objective data that make that desperation quite sensible. The MAGA movement is making otherwise mentally healthy people sick, and ill people much worse.

This toxic social-political environment is like forcing a person suffering from asthma into an enclosed space and making them exert themselves over and over without rest, surrounding them with every allergen and trigger their illness has—and, with great joy, watching them gradually suffocate.

Mental illness is rarely treated with the same urgency and seriousness as physical illness, and the dismissal is even more profound in days when people feeling deep sadness and great empathy for others are derided as “snowflakes.” The callousness of these days makes brain maladies nonexistent, or worse—worthy of ridicule.

And perhaps more distressing, the GOP’s boundless attacks on reality, their continual gaslighting of otherwise sensible people, and their reckless fake news conspiracy theories aren’t just making those who *oppose* them prone to head sickness—it’s doing the same to their supporters. Republicans are playing on their constituents’ paranoia, instability, and fear; ratifying their latent or active neuroses; and justifying the ways they now act out in both emotional and physical violence.

We are seeing outbursts and even assaults in subways and on city streets and in grocery stores by people whose own illnesses and frailties have been exploited by leaders who’ve trafficked in fear, turning strangers into monsters and threats.

America is not well, and its leaders are fine with that.

It's no coincidence that conservative legislatures keep slashing funding for mental health care³ and removing barriers from ill people accessing firearms.⁴ This chaos is what it thrives on and desires. More fear translates into more votes and more sales for their cohorts in the firearms industry.

In an environment populated by emotionally fragile and mentally unhealthy people, it's much easier to act without accountability and to continue to take away resources, personal liberties, and human rights without recompense.

The forces of injustice are counting on sick people growing too tired from pushing back, too overwhelmed fighting their inner demons, and too hopeless at the story to go on.

We can't allow that.

We need to keep our eyes and ears open to the pain of others right now; to hear the suffering reflected in their words or buried in their silence—and to move toward it.

We need to linger long enough to see them: to notice their withdrawal and absence and to make sure they're okay.

We need to use the resources currently available of therapists, doctors, and counselors who understand these invisible sicknesses and how very real they are.

We need to gather in community to bolster and encourage one another and to remind people that they aren't alone in the wars they wage to get better.

We need to reach out to people in our own despair, in our sadness, in our own fight to stay here.

And we all need to carry one another and care for one another.

We are not well, America.

Our leaders are really not well.

We are fighting for our health and for our lives.

We need to get well together.

BEING HUMAN IS HARD

People tell me things. It is one of the great treasures of my work. When I meet strangers who've read my writing, they often feel safe to share what they may not be able to tell anyone else—sometimes almost immediately. Elsa was one of those people. We met following a speaking event at a local church, and after some brief and unassuming small talk, her voice quivered as she began to tell me about a devastating season in her life: loss and grief and helplessness of a kind I'll never comprehend—or at least hope I won't. Her story leveled me. I did the best I could to let her know that she was seen and heard, and I tried to encourage her as I was able in those few moments, surrounded by hundreds of people who had no idea of the gravity of our conversation or the scalding pain and disorienting panic she was in. As our time was coming to a close, Elsa asked for a hug and I gladly obliged. She wiped away the tears that had pooled in her eyes and had begun spilling onto her cheeks, smiled bravely, and said, "Being human is hard. Thank you for helping make it not so hard for me," and walked away.

Elsa is right: being human *is* hard. We weren't prepared for it. None of us asked to be here, and we didn't have any choice about when and where we arrived, the kind of people who would welcome and shape us, or most of what happened for the first two decades of our lives. And even after that, we never really have control over very much, despite sometimes imagining that we do.

We come wired for all sorts of fears and worries and phobias, we're saddled with individual quirks and idiosyncrasies that so easily derail our progress, and we have persistent voices in our heads that criticize and condemn and can be nearly impossible to turn off. And when we step out of our heads and

into the world, we expose ourselves to unthinkable suffering there too. People we let close to us sometimes betray us and do us harm. Strangers purposefully and unintentionally inflict damage. We lose those we love in brutal, senseless, excruciating ways. Despite our best plans and preparations and intentions, things sometimes fall apart. We wrestle continually with unanswerable questions about the hows and whys of our existence. Like Elsa, we all need something that makes the weight bearable, that makes the pains endurable, that makes us feel less alone, that lets the radiant light of hope stream in through the window blinds—something that helps make being human not so hard.

Honestly, I don't know if organized Christianity, on balance, is helpful anymore. What I do know is that the compassionate heart of Jesus I find in the stories told about him is helpful—and urgently needed. The world can use more tender-hearted humans, doing what they can to live selflessly, gently, and focused on others—and that's probably the highest spiritual aspiration we can have: leaving people more loved than we found them. I want to stand with the empathetic souls, no matter where they come from and what they call themselves and who they declare God to be, because that is the most pressing need I see in the world. I want to be with the disparate multitude who believe caring for others is the better path, even if that means never stepping foot in a church building again or doing the hard work of renovating the one that I'm connected to. People who are assailed by the storms of this life don't need any more heartless, loveless, joyless self-identified saints claiming they're Christian while beating the hell out of them. They need people who simply give a damn in a way that emulates Jesus, people who see how hard it is to be human and feel burdened to make it a little softer.

When I leave this place, I'm not very interested that anyone declares me appropriately religious or properly Christian. I'd rather have them say that to the marginalized and alone and hurting and invisible, to the weary, wounded, tired people around me in this life—I was helpful. That's one thing well within my control.

WHEN CRUELTY IS TRENDING

Internet trolls have been having a field day lately.

The conditions are perfect, and they're breeding prodigiously.

An uninvited guest showed up on my social media doorstep late one night. It was a man from a former church, someone I hadn't had seen in five years and hadn't really known all that well prior to that, other than sharing the same large faith community and having a number of mutual Facebook friends. He began with personal insults and taunts more appropriate to a middle school locker room bully than to a grown, educated man with teenage daughters—and then moved to demeaning the many strangers who rightly questioned his tactics.

Over the course of three hours and well into the early morning, the man unapologetically egged on people he'd never spoken to before, immediately disparaging their intellect, their sexuality, and their faith convictions—all the while claiming some imagined moral high ground that supposedly justified his public expressions of contempt. Well-meaning friends responded in my defense, further fueling the man's tantrums, and before long I, too, was sucked into the firestorm, exchanging verbal volleys with him, with little regard for their collateral damage to those looking on.

After catching myself in a welcome moment of self-awareness, I stepped back and watched it all unfold and once again grieved a sight that's become all too familiar. I lamented the fact that there—in those unsolicited, bitter diatribes from an otherwise rational adult human being—was yet further proof of the sickness that has afflicted us all.

Regardless of our political affiliations and religious convictions, many of us can see it clearly and we can feel it pressing down like a heavy stone on our chests: cruelty is trending here.

There is a profound poverty of empathy in our friendships and church communities, our social media pages and political exchanges, our family conversations and our interactions with strangers that we can't ignore—and I'm not sure how we recover what we've lost or remove what's been released into our corporate bloodstream. Right now the only solace I take is in knowing that a tired multitude recognizes the symptoms and shares my lamentations.

As I travel and talk to groups of people all over, I see unanimity in our exhaustion—great company in feeling the oppressive fatigue of living in a place where compassion seems to be both invisible and unnecessary to so many. With cracking voices, strangers publicly share their grief over having to disconnect from people they once loved for the sake of their sanity. They talk of dreading the approaching holidays, not sure whether to avoid family gatherings or to risk the conflict surely waiting there. They recount social media sh*t storms and family dinner blowups. Mothers of LGBTQ children weep over knowing that relatives voted in opposition to the rights and dignity of their own flesh and blood and that they've done so defiantly and with great malice. Muslims talk about living here for decades and only now feeling endangered.

With every story, they reminded me of the trending cruelty.

It's easy to blame Donald Trump for the collective heart sickness we've seen here in recent years, but he didn't create this cruelty—he simply revealed it and leveraged it to his advantage. He didn't invent the malevolence that social media trolls revel in, but he *did* make it go mainstream. He didn't pollute an entire party, but he set a precedent for open ugliness that scores of politicians have fully embraced in order to court his base—and that's simply the ugliest truth about where we are in this moment: while those who serve as our representatives in the world continue to lower the depths of human decency, we, too, will continue to descend unless we resist it fully.

In our heated conversations with family members and knee-jerk exchanges with strangers on social media, it's tempting to meet vitriol with vitriol, to answer inhumanity with more of the same, but that isn't sustainable. If we truly aspire to empathy, we're going to need to call on it when it is most difficult. We can't wait for our political or religious leaders to raise the bar because that may never again happen. We're going to have to do that ourselves. We who are burdened by this enmity are going to have to raise the flag for simple decency and fight to defend it with the very best of ourselves. We're going to have to combat this vicious illness by not perpetuating it.

We're going to have to love the trolls enough not to feed them the empty calories they crave.

We're going to need to oppose this malice by not replicating it.

We're going to have to step away from the seductive, slippery slope of putting people on blast.

We're going to need to keep loving people even when it seems to be a lost and fruitless art.

We're going to need to make compassion fashionable again. Yes, cruelty is trending right now.

It's time we give empathy the bandwidth it deserves.



Truth: Cruelty is exhausting.

Question: How do you see enmity specifically manifesting in your community, on social media, in your circle of influence?

Strategy: In small but meaningful ways, practice empathy, kindness, and understanding as an oppositional presence to that cruelty.

BEING ANGRY WELL

A family member I hadn't seen in a few years texted me, seemingly out of the blue: "You're coming across as really angry lately," he said.

"Good," I replied immediately. "I was afraid I wasn't communicating clearly."

Not appreciating my sarcasm in the spirit in which it was offered, he continued sternly, "I feel sorry for you, for all that anger—especially as a Christian."

"Don't," I said. "I know why I'm angry and I think it's worth it."

Anger tends to get a bad rap in the church. Granted, it's not among Paul's celebrated "fruits of the Spirit" and Jesus preached against it (Matthew 5:22). Many great thinkers before us rightly warn against the potential toxicity of unhealthy, cultivated anger. Buddha says, "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned." Albert Einstein writes that "anger dwells only in the bosom of fools." Plato cautions, "There are two things a person should never be angry at: what they can help, and what they cannot." As a fairly fiery spirit prone to passionate responses to the world (I'll credit my Italian mother for that gift), this kind of wise consensus against anger, well—it really pisses me off.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle offers a different way of thinking about the redemptive possibilities of our outrage that merits considering: "Anyone can get angry—that is easy. . . . But to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy."⁵ Using these various qualifiers

to measure our expression of anger can be game changers whether you're a person of faith or not: the right person—right extent—right time—right motive—right way. So, the *object* of our anger, the *level* of our anger, the *timing* of our anger, the *purpose* of our anger, and the *manner* of our anger all matter. These *who, how much, when, why, how* questions can give us a really useful filter for assessing the appropriate nature of our outrage and, more importantly, a productive expression of it.

It can be difficult to gauge such things, especially when emotion clouds our minds in the moments that we most need clarity. This is because our anger in the immediate present is often about something other than what we imagine it is. For example, when someone you live with doesn't put a dirty glass in the dishwasher and you blow a gasket, it probably isn't about the glass: it may be about you feeling disrespected or not listened to, about being frustrated with your inability to keep the house clean, about the general disorganization of your family—or even far deeper burdens like financial insecurity, emotional disconnection, profound grief—stuff you've been carrying around for decades. The dirty glass on the countertop isn't the dynamite; it's just the current detonator.

But there are times when the thing in front of us *is* the thing: when the obvious sources in the present moment that trigger our outrage are, in fact, the right person and the right time—and we have to decide the right extent, time, motive, and way to move in response. As spiritual people, that means we invite God or a higher power of our better angels into the initial anger and we let our response be the answer to a prayer we can't even find words for.

During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, I watched a self-titled Line of Moms in Portland: a group of women who locked arms and stood between protesters and a heavily armored, heavily armed paramilitary presence sent there precisely to provoke and harass and to use force. These mothers were inarguably angry, but their anger was fueled by their love for humanity and by the imminent threat to it; their anger propelled them out of their homes and into these far more

treacherous streets. There was nothing hateful or destructive or even hostile in their actions, even if they were being received by the officers as adversarial and being greatly vilified by those opposing the BLM movement. In fact, their defiance felt like a profoundly holy act simply by being a presence that affirmed humanity. It was holy ground there on the pavement in Portland, and it resembled Jesus as much as any carefully crafted sermon. It turns out that hatred and anger are often in the eyes of the beholder.

Have you ever met an angry person who didn't believe they were right to be angry? Me either. Christians tend to justify themselves with the phrase *righteous anger*, which I'd just as soon jettison, because the truth is that whether you're conservative or progressive, religious or not, everyone believes their anger is righteous, their cause is just, and their motives are pure (I know I usually do). But if there's any kind of anger people of faith, morality, and conscience should aspire to it is *redemptive anger*, focusing on what results from our responses, the fruit of our efforts and our activism: Do they bring justice, equity, wholeness? Are more people heard and seen and respected in their wake? Is diversity nurtured or assailed because of them?

I think an underappreciated part of Jesus that tends not to get featured in needlepoints and memes is his anger, his righteous and redemptive pissed-offness: his passionate objections to seeing the powerful preying on the vulnerable, watching the religious hypocrites pollute the system, witnessing the well-fed living closefisted toward the hungry. You can't have this passionate response to the world without anger as its initial propellant. It is the spiritually combustible ignition point of our activism. Yes, it will be labeled angry and hateful by people who benefit from inequity and injustice—and religious people on the opposite side of our convictions will sometimes attempt to shame us into silence in the name of the Jesus they probably would have had a real problem with. The beautiful collective outrage of good people is actually the antidote to hateful religion.

AMERICA'S GREAT DEPRESSION

Many mornings, my first moments go like this:

My eyes open and I suddenly become aware that I'm awake. My mind quickly begins assembling itself (*What day is it? Do I need to be anywhere soon, or can I hit "snooze" and rest a few more minutes?*) when a terrible interruption breaks in and I remember the news of the world beyond my bedroom. I remember the lives lost to more senseless violence. I remember the draconian bills passed by legislators intent on further marginalizing an already-vulnerable group of people. I remember the politicians competing to outdo one another in stoking fear and animosity.

Sometimes, the sickening reminder of how close we are to losing our elemental freedoms may abruptly intrude later in the day, while I'm having dinner with friends or driving through the countryside or playing in the yard with my children or laughing at a movie I love—tempering the joy, dimming the light.

Or it may arrive later at night, when the accumulated worries and the cataloged legislative assaults and the inventoried human rights threats of the day sit heavy on my chest and prevent sleep from coming because it feels like we are sliding inexorably toward the abyss.

And I know that I'm not alone.

I know that every single day, some variation of these moments is being played out millions of times inside the heads of people all over this country—people like me who have found the reservoirs of hope dangerously low in recent years and who can't seem to shake the profound sense of dread hovering always in the periphery of their daily life.

Yes, this is our Great Depression.

It's the sickness that the country we love and call home has shown itself afflicted with. It's the weight of every horrible reality about our nation: all our bigotry and discord and hatred set on our chests, hampering our breath.

But it's much closer than that too.

It's the words we've heard from family members, the stuff we've learned about our neighbors, the social media posts from church friends, the incendiary sermons from our pastors, the arguments we've had with coworkers. Every square inch of life seems polluted now. Nothing feels untouched by this movement of unprecedented cruelty.

And the question becomes: How do we transform this near paralyzing sense of sadness into something redemptive?

As with all grief, eventually there must be movement. When there is profound loss of any kind, the only real path is forward: to craft something beautiful and meaningful and life-affirming in response to what has been taken away.

It is the same for those of us who feel cheated out of a kinder, more diverse, more decent America than the one we now have and who want to rescue the nation that still could be from the one that currently is. Individually and collectively, we will have to be the daily, bold, defiant pushback against all that feels and is wrong here—and without delay.

This pushback will come in the small things: in the art we create and the conversations we have and the quiet gestures of compassion that are barely visible.

It will come in the way we fully celebrate the sacred of daily life, across crowded kitchen tables, on quiet wooded paths, and in bustling familiar streets.

It will come as we loudly and unapologetically speak truth where truth is not welcome.

It will come as we connect with one another on social media and in faith communities and in our neighborhoods and as we work together to demand accountability from our elected officials.

It will come as we use the shared resources of our experience and our talents and our numbers to ensure that our children inherit a world worth being here for.

Most importantly, it will come through a tangible and collective movement of good people to the polls, making known on a national level the future we want. We have to transform our shared grief into a unified statement about what we stand for and what we will not abide.

Yes, friend, there is a great deal to grieve over in these days and there will be more ahead—but there is even more worth fighting for.

So yes, grieve, but then move.

Be fueled by your sadness, strengthened by your anger—and into the fight.

Together we will survive this Great Depression—by resisting it.



Truth: You always have agency and proximity.

Question: Where and when do you find yourself obsessing over or fixating on situations and realities that you seem to have no possible way of changing?

Strategy: Come up with three to five tangible ways you can (in the small and close of your daily life) move out of your head and onto your feet.

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