

} PREPARING for a BEAUTIFUL END {
by Josiah Neufeld

Sunlight streams through the second-floor windows of a duplex on a tree-lined residential street in Victoria. In the kitchen, Carmen Spagnola is simmering a pot of rabbit meat on the stove while her husband, Ruben Anderson, Googles techniques for making sauerkraut. Their home looks commonplace enough: bookshelves line the walls, a vase of lilies adorns the dining room table. Outside, the lawn is getting a little ragged around the edges, there's a pile of chopped firewood in the driveway, and seven black, silky-haired rabbits nibble at the grass poking up into their chicken-wire runs. Nothing too far from ordinary. Nothing to signal to a visitor that Carmen and Ruben are busy preparing for the end of civilization.

On the morning I first visited Ruben and Carmen, standing in their sunlit kitchen, I mentioned somewhat glibly that I was writing an article about the end of the world. Carmen's response was matter-of-fact. "Everything comes to an end," she said as she poured herself a glass of water. "It's mysterious, but it's also so completely ordinary. Of course it's going to end."

Ruben made us each an espresso using an ancient chrome-handled machine salvaged from a restaurant he used to own. The coffee was bitter on my tongue, but also rich, layered with complexity.

Last fall, Carmen watched an old friend die of cancer. She was struck by the dignity with which he encountered his death. He called it the next great adventure. Carmen would like to bear witness to the unraveling of our society with the same unflinching gaze. "Rather than trying to preserve or escape or even prolong, we have to meet it," she said. "And right now we're actually making it worse by not meeting the moment the way that we need to. And that is undignified. It hurts our sensibility as humans, because I think most of us know on some level that this is not working."

As I drank my coffee and looked out the window at the quiet street and the maroon leaves of the ornamental plum trees casting their patterned shade on the sidewalk, I found it difficult to envision this pleasant reality coming to an end. But isn't that always how it is? We all know we're going to die; we just don't quite believe it.

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Ruben and Carmen are among a growing number of people who have become convinced that our species has wrecked its natural habitat beyond repair. They believe human civilization is entering the first stages of a collapse from which no valiant activism, alternative energy, or utopian technology can ultimately save it. Earlier this year, a *New York*

Times Magazine profile of longtime environmentalist Paul Kingsnorth stirred some heated debate around the question many activists have been quietly asking themselves for a while: what if we're fucked? Kingsnorth has publicly given up trying to rescue civilization and is

turning his energy towards grieving its imminent death. Even green movements with the popular support of Bill McKibben's 350.org don't stand a chance of stopping climate change and only peddle false hope, Kingsnorth told the *Times*.

Ruben finds no fault with Kingsnorth's reasoning. "I think almost everyone who puts serious effort into criticizing him is being defensive because his words cut so close to the bone," he told me.

There does seem to be some fairly ominous handwriting on the wall. Homo sapiens have degraded the planet's soil (half the earth's topsoil has been lost in the past 50 years), heated its atmosphere past the tipping point (scientists say the melting polar ice caps are now irreversible), acidified its oceans (some ecologists predict saltwater fish will be gone by 2048), and ushered in the greatest mass extinction since dinosaurs were wiped out (environmental writer J. B. MacKinnon estimates

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humans have reduced the natural variety and abundance of life on the planet to one tenth of what it once was). This March, a NASA-funded team of mathematicians projected that unless humanity manages to employ drastic reductions to inequality and population growth in coming decades, the collapse of human civilization will be “difficult to avoid.”

Our current civilization wouldn't be the first to engineer its own downfall, but it might

be the last. Sumer, Rome, the Maya, and Easter Island all continued to destroy their ecological foundations, even when they could see what they were doing. Each successive civilization on this planet falls harder and pays more dearly for its mistakes, observed historian and archeologist Ronald Wright in his 2004 Massey Lectures. Globalization has now tied all seven billion of us together in one giant experiment. “As we climbed the rungs of progress, we kicked out the rungs below,” Wright warned. “There is no going back without catastrophe.”

Speak too freely of apocalypse and you'll be called a survivalist or a rapture-ready Christian. Carmen and Ruben's friends jokingly call them doomsday preppers. But they aren't stockpiling weapons or hoarding goods for a future barter economy. Instead they're learning how to grow, raise, slaughter, harvest, and preserve as much of their food as they can while cultivating the spiritual tools they believe will be needed in a time of crisis.

“We're trying to figure out how we can take this understanding of the collapse of the world as we know it and express it as something that is joyful and abundant and richly connected,” Ruben said

to me as we sat down to a lunch of Reuben sandwiches – aptly named, since Ruben himself had fermented the sauerkraut, cured the bacon, and baked the dark rye loaf from which we sawed generous slices. “The crust explodes beautifully in your mouth,” he pointed out.

“We try to take an inventory every meal,” Carmen said. “What here was produced by us? There's always a few things that aren't.”

“The cheese,” said Ruben. “This is crappy store cheese.” His parmesan had turned out hard as rock.

It was evident to me as we relished our food, washed down with glasses of home-brewed Belgian ale and chocolate stout, that these collapseniks weren't going to spend the twilight of our civilization feeling sorry for themselves. Instead they were savoring every bite of their homegrown food with an attention that verged on reverence.

After lunch, Ruben took me down to the cellar.

It was crammed to the corners with bottles, jars, pressure cookers, a cider press built from a truck jack and two-by-fours, and two glass, bulb-shaped carboys containing of 30 gallons of apple cider. Lining the pantry shelves were rank upon rank of canning jars full of tomatoes, beans, sauerkraut, squash, pears, blackberries, rabbit rillettes (similar to pâté), and several varieties of beer and cider. At peak stock they'd had about 700 jars of

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food. A quick inventory revealed they were down to around 100. “Seeing this gives me a panicky feeling,” Ruben said.



Ten years ago Ruben was among the evangelical voices chorusing for electric cars, recycling, and green energy. Ultimately, it was his study of human behaviour that caused him to give up preaching and start preserving.

Ruben is tall and lithe in his mid-40s, with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, grey-blue eyes, and small silver hoops in his earlobes. His

mental capacity for accumulating and ordering data enables him to quickly envision interconnected systems where others may see only a few isolated strands. Carmen calls it “intuiting logic.”

Throughout university – he has degrees in theatre and sculpture from the University of Victoria, and industrial design from Emily Carr University – Ruben educated himself on topics he was curious about. He read books on ecology, psychology, and economics – including a “horribly boring” book on rural electrification – always flipping to the bibliographies at the end to find new sources of knowledge. Evidence of his wide-ranging reading habits can be found crammed into his living room bookshelf. Volumes on eco-design, human decision-making, biomimicry, and psychology rub covers the sci-fi novels of Isaac Asimov and Ursula Le Guin, and manuals on making cider, cheese, bread, and sausage.

Ruben graduated from design school eager to create beautiful, durable, products from recycled materials. Instead, he found himself designing picture frames and vases that would be manufactured in China and sold to middle-class Vancouverites. From his reading he knew that 80 per cent of manufactured goods end up in landfills within six weeks of being purchased. So he quit his job and managed to finagle a position with the City of Vancouver’s sustainability department. During his tenure at the city, and later at Metro Vancouver, Ruben helped design systems to encourage recycling and reduce waste. He also did a lot of reading about human behaviour change. But the grind of city bureaucracy began to wear him down. He was also becoming increasingly convinced that even a green-minded city like Vancouver wasn’t going to change fast enough to head off an ecological disaster.

Last year, Ruben wrote a post on his blog explaining why appealing to people’s consciences to use less water or recycle or give up their cars will never save our planet. That’s because 95 to 99 per

cent of the decisions we make aren’t the result of conscious choice but of socialization and the systems that surround us.

“We think our mind controls our behaviour, but in fact we are social creatures, not rational,” Ruben wrote. “We have built a world – we have built our systems – for the rational person, not the real person, so we have built a world that hates us. We have

built a world with infinite hot water, and then we are blamed for taking long showers. We have built a world with wide highways and fast cars, and then we are blamed for driving too much. We might as well blame the giraffe for eating leaves from the top of the tree.”

To deal with his anxiety about the future, Ruben started to can food. He’d buy boxes of tomatoes and peaches at farmer’s markets and boil them up them in his kitchen. “I know in many ways it doesn’t make sense. I know a closet full of canned goods isn’t going to get me through the apocalypse, I just felt like I had to do something on a smaller scale,” he said. It was around this time that he met Carmen. The two of them spent a lot of time canning and talking about what it would take for humans to survive on the planet. “No one had ever talked to me in my language before,” Ruben said. He didn’t know then that Carmen was just coming through her own dark night of the soul.

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Carmen was in Grade 10 when she found out that the world as she knew it was going to end. Her stepdad – a rough, hard-drinking man who spent most of her childhood working on oil rigs in the Yukon – told her that oil would run out in her lifetime. “That really scared me,” Carmen said. “Here’s a guy who I don’t think knows much, but he knows this secret.”

Now in her late 30s, Carmen has a clear, expressive face with fine eyebrows and high cheeks that colour easily. When she speaks of intense or emotional subjects, she interjects little bursts of laugh-

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ter into the pauses between her sentences.

Carmen dreams big and then makes her dreams happen. At age 17 she left home, travelled to Europe and studied culinary arts at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. Afterwards, she found work cooking for millionaires on their private yachts. With her student debt paid off, she returned to Canada, took some classes in economics, and got into the wine and spirits business. Carmen was living in Vancouver with her young daughter when she experienced a series of lucid dreams in which she envisioned a business logo with the tagline: “Sustainable Merchandise and Responsible Trade.” She decided to launch her own business selling beautiful, locally made, eco-friendly furniture. Miraculously, it seemed, the financing she needed poured in. She built a devoted customer base and journalists started quoting her in articles about doing business with a conscience. Carmen had found her calling; everything about it seemed divinely ordained. So when her business collapsed, she refused to believe it. When the financial crisis of 2008 hit, customers stopped walking through her door. Within several months she was forced to shutter her store, but she didn’t file for bankruptcy until months later when she finally admitted to herself that her business had failed. She was emotionally devastated.

“I needed to go through my own experience of collapse to have what I now see as a sacred experience,” Carmen said. “I needed to become wise to what actually happens when things are collapsing: you can’t see it, and then you can’t believe it, and then you can’t accept it, and then you feel like you are unworthy. And after that you have to figure out how to love yourself in spite of your failure and to love your failure for the gift it has given you.”

Eventually Carmen recovered from her own personal collapse. She trained as a clinical hypnotherapist and studied transpersonal psychology. Recently she opened her own practice doing hypnotherapy and intuitive readings. She thinks about her failed

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business with both sadness and a twinge of embarrassment. “Part of me feels like a foolish child for having honoured such a superficial and excessive lifestyle as viable and desirable,” she says. Yet her experience of failure has helped her counsel others dealing with loss. “Rumi says we need to die before we die,” she says. “That’s how we live well.” Carmen believes that what makes life meaningful is not necessarily happiness, but a willingness to experience the entire depth and breadth of what life has to offer. Thus, when we experience small deaths – “like failures, environmental collapse, or collapse of identity” – it gives us the opportunity to learn how to die so we can live better lives.



Ruben and Carmen hold out hope that the fall will happen over several generations, allowing human civilization to collapse into smaller, mutually supportive agrarian societies. But even the best case scenarios involve a lot of death. Small-scale organic farms can’t feed 7 billion people. Even though I was inspired by Ruben and Carmen’s “small and delicious life,” as they called it, I wasn’t sure they’d reckoned with the scale of suffering a global collapse would cause. Perhaps no one has. Still, I wanted the conversation to get more real. How do people talk about apocalypse in Kiribati, an island nation slowly being submerged by the rising Pacific? How do we talk about collapse when it affects the people we love—our own children, for instance?

Mirabella, Carmen’s daughter, is a quiet, dark-haired 10-year-old who thinks about things like how to get more allowance money and whether her friends at school think she’s weird because her parents raise rabbits for food. As the four of us sat down to a delicious dinner of rabbit hocks braised in herbs and beer, I asked Mirabella what she imagined would be different in the future.

“Hoverboards,” she suggested.

Was there anything she worried about?

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“Less wilderness in which to go hiking.”

Later I asked Carmen and Ruben how you prepare your child for a future that might not involve hoverboards after all. Or antibiotics. Or electricity.

“I can’t give her safety,” said Ruben, “but I can give her skills.” He meant things like hunting, butchering, and canning. But Carmen was thinking about another set of skills she wanted for her daughter: the ability to cultivate her own spirituality, to feel empathy for others, and to know the joy of working together with a community. “That’s what will keep her safe, I think,” said Carmen. “Not that she’ll necessarily be a survivor, but she’ll be someone who can handle – emotionally, spiritually, physically – whatever’s happening to her and recognize that when she feels despair, that’s okay and that’s natural, and here are the skills you have for that. And when she’s feeling inspired, that’s great, and she can carry other people.”

As Carmen talked about her daughter’s uncertain future, I saw tears shining in her eyes. “I do get sad and teary,” she said, without wiping them away. “Mirabella’s going to have so much pain. But at the same time, it’s like that pain-beauty when you see a great work of art and it catches your heart in a vice grip. The beauty of that is she’ll probably go through it so well because she will recognize that there’s a richness to experiencing life in every dimension.”

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One name that came up in my conversations with Ruben and Carmen was that of Stephen Jenkinson, a Harvard-trained theologian who worked for years as the director of palliative care at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto before he started leading his own workshops on dying well. Jenkinson was the subject of a 2008 National Film Board documentary called *Griefwalker*. “We don’t have to like death,” he said, “Who would? But we do have to befriend it.” Jenkinson challenges the Judeo-Christian no-

tion of death as punishment. Instead he calls death a gift, “the cradle of our love of life.”

I wondered if Jenkinson would have something to say to a culture afraid to face its own end. I’d heard he was coming to Vancouver for a talk, so I sent him an email and asked if he’d meet me for coffee. We met at a sidewalk café in downtown Vancouver and talked about endings as boisterous sports fans streamed past us on their way to a Whitecaps soccer game.

Jenkinson speaks in aphorisms like a wilderness sage, and he dresses the part. On the afternoon we met he was wearing a black vest over a collared white shirt with billowy pleated sleeves gathered at the wrist.

An iron-coloured braid hung down his back and a wide-brimmed hat shaded his grizzled chin from the late afternoon sun.

“I worked in the death trade for quite a long time,” he said, referring to palliative care, “and here’s what I saw people do. They thought their obligation when they were dying was to proceed in such a way that the dying was invisible. That this constituted strength.” That’s exactly how our culture is choosing to deal with its own death, by pretending nothing’s happening. “The antidote is this,” he said, fixing me with his sharp blue eyes. “The way you’re going to die well is you’re going to allow your dying to change every idea you ever had about *ought to* and *supposed to*, and who we are to each other, and what this time is for.”

Jenkinson believes the acts of maturity and wisdom called for in our time are not deeds of individual heroism, but a willingness to be faithful witnesses, to “live with the ending of things.” He doesn’t recommend trying to hasten the death of our culture – as some anarcho-primitivists would advocate – any more than we’d try to hasten the death of our mother if we were called to her deathbed. “Because our culture is our mother, in the mythic sense.” But we need to be willing to witness her death, grieve it, and allow it to change us.

How do we allow news of our death to change

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us? I asked Jenkinson for more specifics, but, like any sage, he wasn't too prescriptive. But here's something I do know: what we believe about ourselves in times of crisis matters. American writer Rebecca Solnit reported on Hurricane Katrina and researched numerous other disasters. She learned that, contrary to popular belief, in the wake of a disaster "most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it." Scholars who study disaster have found that the people who react violently in crises are most often elites who believe humans are "bestial and dangerous," and who think they must protect themselves.

Jenkinson's last admonition was this: grief is not a burden for the individual to bear. These days too many people try to do the witnessing alone, sitting in their living rooms watching social justice documentaries. They end up immobilized by guilt or despair. "That's not what's called for," he said. "If you've got a village, the village has got to carry the realization of what is so individuals are not paralyzed by it."

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I saw that village at work when I accompanied Carmen, Ruben, and Mirabella to the Quaker meeting they regularly attend. Carmen first encountered the Quakers when she and Ruben moved to Victoria three years ago. The first time she attended a meeting, she was struck by their practice of sitting together in silence, their communal decision-making, and their willingness to share deeply about their lives. Since then, Carmen has begun the process of becoming a member of the Victoria congregation. Although neither she nor Ruben call themselves Christian, what binds the Quakers together isn't so much shared belief as shared practice.

"That's Quaker witness," Carmen said. "I feel that in times of collapse, that is the most humane

way I can go through it: to witness other people and to know that I am being witnessed."

When we arrived at the meeting house, a small circle of people were already sitting in silence. Inside, the 100-year-old building had the wooden smell of an old ship. Chairs scraped on the plank floor as the circle opened to include us. Everyone smiled; no one spoke. I noticed most of the hair around the circle was white or grey. We sat together while sunlight filtered greenly through oak leaves into the windows. The stillness of the room settled around me like a blanket. One woman was reading a book. There was no pretense, no expectation. I listened to the sounds of the outer world seep through the walls: birds chattering, the stutter of a nail gun, the drone of an airplane. After half an hour, each member of the circle reached out to briefly squeeze the hands of their neighbours.

I remembered Carmen and Ruben telling me about an experience they'd had bringing some friends with them to one of the Quaker meetings.

During the service, a man had stood up and spoken about a phone call he'd received early that morning. He'd been expecting a call telling him that his brother had died. Instead it was his brother calling to wish him a happy father's day and to let him know that he was ready to die.

"That's a gift," Carmen said afterwards, reflecting on her friends' experience of the moment, "that somebody else stood up and shared that – that was a cathartic opening for them to touch some grief within themselves."

Josiah Neufeld's essays, journalism and short fiction have been published in The Walrus, Hazlitt and Prairie Fire. He's a full-time, stay-at-home-writer-dad who lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He believes the crisis humanity is facing offers us an opportunity to learn to live with more compassion and less exploitation.

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burden for the
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