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# The News Summer From Hell and the End of Optimism



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By this point in the summer, a sane person could reasonably conclude that the world is going nuts. Spiraling out of control, descending into darkness, making optimism a delusional last recourse — that kind of feeling.

“What fresh hell is this?” — the question Dorothy Parker asked when her doorbell rang — now applies to the news. If you’re staying informed, you’re licking the razor. Unfortunately, not following what’s happening in the world isn’t really an option. These horrors seize our lizard brains; we’re hard-wired to pay attention to danger.

No wonder we’re nervous wrecks — just look at what we’ve been processing.

In June, we learned that 10,000 immigrant children a month, many alone and under 13, had been crossing our border, creating a humanitarian crisis and a political circus.

In early July, the Gaza war began. Some saw it as a necessary response to an existential threat. Some, including me, were heartbroken by its human cost and despondent about losing all hope of reaching a two-state solution.

The next week, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed by a surface-to-air missile fired from Ukrainian territory controlled by pro-Russian separatists. You did not need to be a conspiracy theorist to connect the dots from its 298 dead passengers and

crew to Vladimir Putin.

Then, in early August, came a vertiginous four-day run of horrors.

On Aug. 8, we discovered we were living in a real-life zombie movie when the World Health Organization declared Ebola — *Ebola!* — an international public health emergency.

On Aug. 9, an unarmed black teenager was shot dead by a policeman in Ferguson, Mo. We barely had time to be outraged by injustice when, on Aug. 10, Ferguson's police turned out to do crowd control looking like the U.S. Army in Fallujah, and the national conversation about race we had been urged to have just the day before was superseded by a call for a national conversation about the militarization of police.

On Aug. 11, we learned Robin Williams had committed suicide, and along with our shock and grief came a call for a national conversation about depression and mental illness.

Last week saw the release of the video of James Foley's decapitation, making it clear, if the plight of the Yazidis had not, that ISIS is even scarier than Ebola, and raising the specter of worse-than-9/11 terrorists who travel on U.S. and E.U. passports.

And then this weekend a 6.0 earthquake struck Napa, which was enough to rouse from denial, at least for a moment, anyone who lives near a geological fault.

(Speaking of denial and news from hell, did I mention climate change? With every other miserable thing going on, droughts, record temperatures and the melting of the polar ice caps could barely muscle their way onto our summer radar screen.)

We who experience these events through the media are infinitely better off than people for whom they are life-or-death reality. But even at our remove, it's hard not to feel beaten up and helpless. This feeling is amplified by the media's economic self-interest in keeping us anxious and riveted, and by our addiction to our ubiquitous screens. Steven Pinker's argument — that this is actually the least violent time in human history — may be factually accurate, and there are plenty of genocides within living memory to put today's torrent of rotten news in perspective, but that's cold comfort when all you want to do is pull the blanket over your head.

It's stunning how steep a dive our optimism has taken since the start of this century, when a Pew poll reported that an "overwhelming" 81 percent of Americans felt optimistic about the future. But this month an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll said that 71 percent of us think we're on the wrong track, and Gallup reported that 76 percent of us are dissatisfied with the way things are going - and that comes on the heels of a Penn Schoen Berland poll, headlined "Americans Are No Longer Optimists," which found that two-thirds of us question whether we'll be back on the right track even 10 years from now.

Optimism, long a topic of philosophy, is now also the province of scientists. (Check out Maria Popova's Brain Pickings blog for an overview.) Pessimists can train themselves to be optimists, says psychologist Martin Seligman. Neuroscientist Tali Sharot says optimism — not realism — can lengthen your life. "Although the belief in a better future is often an illusion," she writes, "hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health." If you believe the glass is half full, what it turns out to be half full of is serotonin, cortisol, dopamine and oxytocin — the feel-good neurotransmitters that get us through the nihilistic night.

The existence of evil — which is the subtext of the news this summer from hell — is corrosive of optimism. But Helen Keller, in her book *Optimism*, wrote that the struggle with evil is one of life's greatest blessings: "It makes us strong, patient, helpful men and women. It lets us into the soul of things and teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. My optimism, then, does not rest on the absence of evil, but on a glad belief in the preponderance of good and a willing effort always to cooperate with the good, that it may prevail."

I'd be glad to turn my attention to "the preponderance of good" in the world. But that will be damn near impossible until as much good news as bad news is Breaking News.