

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I told Norma I had a sexy dream last night. "It was about you," I reassured her. "Good," she said. "That's better than the dreams you've been having about the end of the world." True, I've been having my share of nightmares — though at least they've been about my beloved Earth and not some other planet. Maybe I need to be more discriminating about what I do before going to bed. To take my mind off the imploding economy, I've been reading about outer space: rogue black holes wandering through the Milky Way, gamma-ray bursts a million trillion times as bright as the sun, asteroids whose orbits may put them on a collision course with the earth. Admittedly my interest in end-of-the-world prophecies is easily piqued these days. Maybe that's because, as a man in his mid-sixties, I'd rather ponder the possibility of a black hole swallowing the planet than the far more imminent prospect of my own inevitable end.

Even more unsettling than the threats from outer space, however, are the grim predictions of the eminent British scientist and inventor James Lovelock, who, on the subject of global climate change, makes an impassioned environmental crusader like former vice president Al Gore sound downright sunny. Let's put it this way: If Gore and Lovelock were in the same dental practice, Gore would look inside your mouth, shake his head, and warn that if you don't start brushing and flossing after every meal, you're going to lose most of your teeth. Lovelock would wave his hand dismissively. "If you want to save your teeth," he'd say, "put them in a jar." Global warming is irreversible, Lovelock says: We've already pushed the planet past the tipping point. Solar panels and compact fluorescents aren't going to avert disaster. By the end of this century, he predicts, floods, droughts, violent storms, and melting polar ice caps will make most of the world uninhabitable. Food shortages will drive millions of people north — to Canada, Iceland, Scandinavia, and the Arctic basin — leading to increased political tension, wars, and epidemics. Eighty percent of the world's population will perish.

Unfortunately Lovelock isn't easily dismissed. He invented a device that proved pesticides were seeping into the food chain. He figured out that man-made chemicals were destroying the ozone layer. He also formulated the Gaia hypothesis, which proposes that the earth is a living, self-regulating organism, not an inanimate entity. Named after the Greek goddess of the earth, the theory informs much of climate science today.

I wish I knew what to make of Lovelock's apocalyptic vision. On the one hand, it's unimaginably horrifying. On the other hand — given how many predictions about climate change have already come true — what's really horrifying is that it's all too easy to imagine. Maybe Gaia loves us like a mother, but not as much as we want to be loved: all our sins forgiven, milk and cookies waiting for us at the end of our lives. Maybe Gaia sees us as one of her more regrettable ideas, a bull in the planetary china shop, not content with merely killing others of our kind but apparently determined to wreak havoc on every other

species, too. Maybe it will take whole cities being submerged and entire continents rendered uninhabitable for humanity to recognize that, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "Everybody, soon or late, sits down to a banquet of consequences."

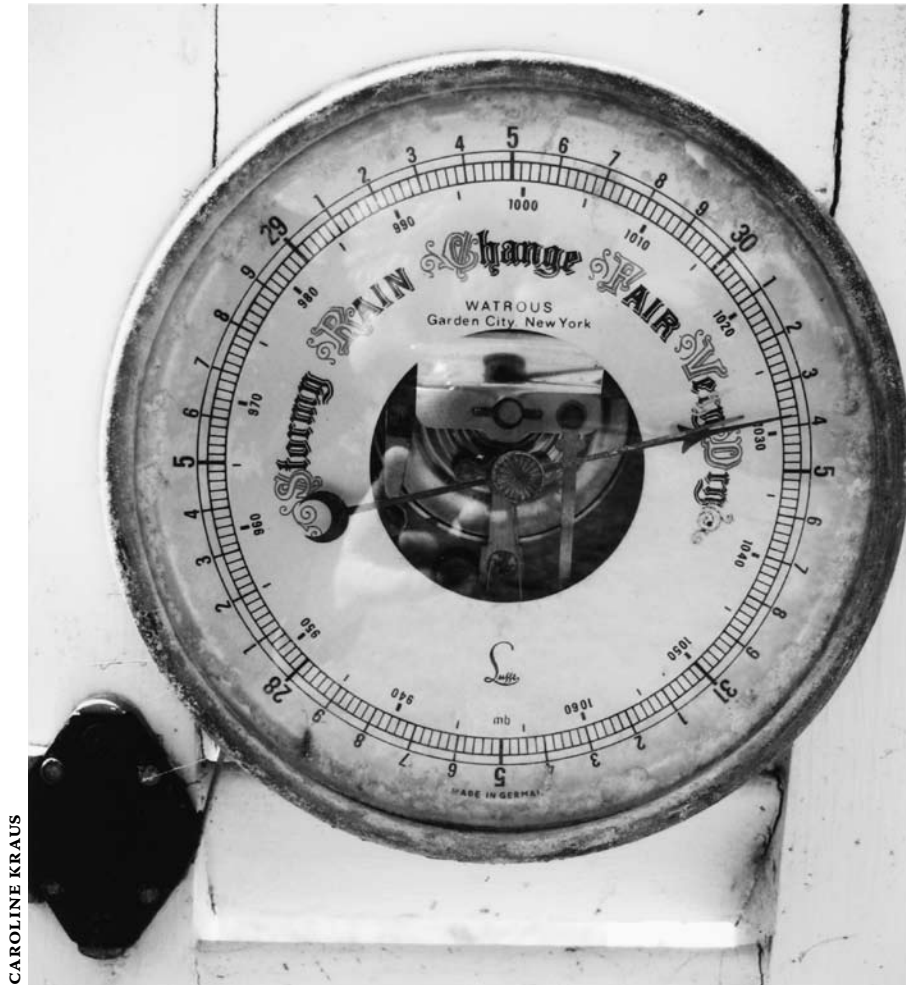
Shall we blame the administration of George W. Bush for eight years of sanctifying corporate greed; eight years of dismantling environmental protections; eight years — eight years! — of intransigence about global warming? Of course. But isn't it also fair to say we took a wrong turn a couple of hundred years ago, when we started using fossil fuels as if they were going out of style — which, lo and behold, they are? For that matter, maybe the problem started ten thousand years ago, at the start of the agricultural revolution, when we began cutting down magnificent forests to make room for crops. Yes, maybe the main threat to civilization is civilization itself. Go figure.

Is it time, then, to wave goodbye? Goodbye, New York. Goodbye, London. Goodbye, Mumbai; and goodbye, Tokyo; and goodbye, little Dutch boy with your finger in the dike. Goodbye to the great museums and the five-star restaurants and the greasy pizza joints and the gritty little neighborhoods where the rent is still affordable. Goodbye.

But wait just a New York minute! History is full of surprises. Until recently, our collective psyche was haunted not by global climate change but by the specter of global thermonuclear war. Yet, notwithstanding decades of hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union — decades of troop movements and proxy wars and espionage and false warnings over impending enemy attacks — a nuclear exchange never occurred. And, speaking of miracles, wasn't it widely assumed, during the apartheid era in South Africa, that Nelson Mandela would die in his prison cell? And didn't one of the most astute political observers I know insist, just before the 2008 election, that Barack Obama couldn't be elected president because the United States was too racist? (For that matter, didn't two students from the business school at the University of North Carolina study *The Sun's* finances thirty years ago and conclude that the magazine faced near-certain bankruptcy?) Lovelock may be right that our goose is cooked. But I take some comfort in knowing that, throughout history, plenty of condemned but resourceful geese got themselves out of hot water and lived to honk again.

Regrettably my own ability to foretell the future peaked in the sixth grade. Dressed in a robe and turban, I walked onstage at the beginning of a class play, introduced myself as "Yogi Safransky," peered into my crystal ball, and confidently predicted that the audience would love the show we had in store for them. And I was right! Alas I had no clue that the gas-guzzling car my father had just bought, and the millions of others just like it, were actually a bigger threat to future generations than the Soviet army.

So I don't claim to be prescient. Nor can I debate science with an intellectual giant like Lovelock. But my intuition tells me that it's premature to throw in the towel; that the future



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isn't fixed; that the demons we've created and the angels of our better nature are still slugging it out. Sure, the odds are probably against us, but the odds are always against accomplishing anything meaningful, whether it's saving a marriage or saving the planet. How much do you sacrifice for a dying cause? Maybe nothing; maybe everything. As the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci encouraged: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

I'm wary of obsessing about global warming to the exclusion of other environmental problems — water pollution, habitat destruction, overpopulation, take your pick — or, for that matter, obsessing about the environment instead of dealing with the myriad social and economic injustices in our midst. Perhaps a hundred years from now humanity will be feasting on the smorgasbord of despair Lovelock has laid out for us. Or perhaps the "most intelligent species" (according to the "most intelligent species") will actually start to act intelligently; perhaps we'll curb our enormous appetites and think twice before buying the next gizmo or cutting down the last redwood. Whether Lovelock is right or wrong, however, the challenge of living from one unpredictable moment to the

next remains the same. During the height of the Cold War, the spiritual teacher Ram Dass was asked whether the world was facing a nuclear Armageddon or, as some were prophesying, a "new age" of peace and love and deeper awareness. Ram Dass said, "I used to think I should have an opinion on this. But as I examined it, I saw that if it's going to be Armageddon and we're going to die, the best thing to do to prepare for it is to quiet my mind, open my heart, and deal with the suffering in front of me. And if it's going to be the new age, the best thing to do is to quiet my mind, open my heart, and deal with the suffering in front of me." Is the moral calculus any different today?

You can count on such thoughts to make a man appreciate the mundane pleasures of a Sunday afternoon. I stand still for a moment in my small backyard. Yellow sun, blue sky: mix them together for a splash of green. I take off my glasses, wipe them clean, put them back on, and peer at the exotic life-forms all around me: the sprawling fig tree heavy with fruit; a hummingbird sipping nectar from a tiny red flower; this mysterious world I rarely take time to see, as if I, and this world, had forever. ■