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Ivory plaque of the prophet Joel, seventh century (Wikimedia Commons/Marie-Lan Nguyen)



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Ivory plaque of the prophet Joel, seventh century (Wikimedia Commons/Marie-Lan Nguyen)

Let me give you the whole picture. I live rather stupidly. I work seven days a week in pursuit of some deadline. While I give a lot of retreats, I don't take them. I don't honor the Sabbath, don't do vacations. Writers serve a life sentence.

Then my 90-year-old mother breaks her right arm last winter. That's not on my schedule. She's facing months of disability, unable to comb her hair, put on socks or open Tupperware. She lives in a town with no helpful services. Mom lives alone and she's scared.

I love this woman fiercely. I'm also preparing a retreat on discernment and don't have time for her arm to be broken. After months studying discernment, I'm quite clear that faith is about choices, not creeds. We're not what we believe or say. We're the sum of what we do. So what we do matters.

Accidents don't happen at our convenience. Love and family make primary claims — but so does livelihood. Time is an issue. Money is a factor. Human need. Exhaustion. The tangle of our obligations is complex. We tumble through a roiling sea of choices each hour. And out of this blender of decisions emerges who we are. Want to be a saint? Choose it now or never.

Who am I to talk about discernment? I don't live effectively. The wake of miscalculations and petty choices behind me hardly makes me an expert in Christian living. The best I can say is, I'm trying. Like you, I'm trying so hard to understand how to live. I want to know what the universe is asking of me when a 90-year-old woman slips on the ice and breaks her arm.

There's a saying: "The problem with humanity is that we are not in our right minds." It's not that we're all crazy — though let's not rule that out. The problem is we're in our *wrong* minds. The problem is our thinking. To make good choices, we have to engage good thinking.

Revisit the last news cycle, and realize how precious few of us are in our right minds. If the world goes to hell, now or later, all of this wrong thinking is a primary reason that it does. We think badly when reacting from anger or fear, both primitive and defensive emotions. Bad thinking also comes from positionalism: We take a position, take a side and won't consider any information that nuances or challenges our stance.

This may sound like a lot of academic hooey. But it dribbles out of the land of theory and into my personal history as I arrive at my mother's house and let myself in to a parlor where an elderly woman I adore sits quietly in a chair reading a magazine. She looks up. "Oh," my mother says, holding up a slender arm bound in an unwieldy cast. "I'm reading your article here called 'Things Fall Apart.' I guess things are falling apart. Starting with me."

We laugh together. Mom's right, of course. Things *are* falling apart, but it's not just her arm. It could be her world as she knows it. The doctors have said unnerving things about "disintegrating bone turned to powder" and "no guarantees" about regaining function. This may be the game-changing moment when Mom's independence goes to powder.

The article on Mom's lap is one I wrote months ago about the prophet Joel. Nobody reads him except on Ash Wednesday. Joel blows a trumpet and calls an assembly. He demands we fast and weep and mourn. Rend your hearts, not your clothes, Joel says. And return to the God of mercy.

Most of us don't read the rest of what Joel has to say. Why would we? His is a bizarre tale about things falling apart. About *apocalypse*, in biblical terms: societies failing, kingdoms coming down, terror spreading, disaster looming, the enemy at the gates. A plague of locusts descends on the country and eats away the future without pity. Joel's is not a consoling prophecy. It makes for uncomfortable bedtime reading.

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And here's my 90-year-old mother with her shattered arm, reading Joel after dark. Mom didn't go to college and hasn't read the Bible. But she's had a bad fall and worse scare. Joel suddenly makes sense.

At the moment, the prophet is hauntingly correct. Things *are* falling apart. My mother. Her routines in the house she's lived in for 70 years. She can't do this anymore and must surely suspect it. Mom's reading about the apocalypse and it's making sense to her, which is freaking me out: ancient kingdoms collapsing, terror spreading, enemies at the gates, locusts descending. Of course, it's her kingdom collapsing; her children at the gates. With my arrival, the first locust has descended on the once-fertile field she calls her privacy.

Discernment means nothing if not this: making sense of the often-senseless events that befall us. We have to learn how to prioritize and value. We have to listen. We can't rush in with prefabricated answers from a storehouse of bias, opinion or catechism. By way of outcomes, my mother *knows* what she wants. She wants nothing to change. But I don't know what to want. I love my mother and don't want to hurt her. But I see a woman caught in the eye of apocalypse, and I'm afraid.

Ten weeks later, my mother's liberated arm is a squiggle. It's relearning how to be of service. She resolves to wear bangles to hide the corkscrew shape. This time it was just a broken arm, not the end of the world. A dress rehearsal for apocalypse but not the real thing. Call off the assembly. Put away the trumpet — for now.

Things fall apart. They always will. My mother may be more careful on the ice next winter. But will I? I still live stupidly, calculating no room for apocalypse. Living in one's right mind is harder than you think.

[Alice Camille is the author of *For Everything There Is a Season* and other titles at alicecamille.com. All Soul Seeing columns can be found at NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

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