

Death Rehearsal—An Intrapsychic and Interpersonal World “Dry Run”

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Abstract: *The author describes “death rehearsal,” an anguished intrapsychic “dry run,” in which catastrophic outcomes are imagined in vivid detail to manage fear, seek meaning, and mobilize action. Drawing on a war-baby sensibility, clinical experience, and the Chicken Little fable, she contrasts critical thinking and reality-testing with panic, misinformation, and manipulation. The essay maps interpersonal and self-regulatory pathways, from free association to coping techniques, toward healing, hope, and dignity amid real threats.*

Keywords: *childhood lessons, critical thinking, death rehearsal, emotional processing, fearfrightening information, healing paths, intrapsychic process, political fears, psychohistory*

May Day

Whenever my husband has a medical or aviation emergency, I do what I call a “death rehearsal.” I can imagine and examine the worst in terrifying detail. It’s like the dress rehearsal that is the final practice for a play, musical, or wedding, in full costume and makeup, and with all the technical elements of the actual performance. Only my rehearsals are fraught with anguish and the fear of a bad outcome. They also evoke in me a search for healing, salvation, and transformation.

I am a “war baby.” The psychological effects of a frightened and frightening world have been embedded in my life since birth, and I am not alone. My work with psychotherapy patients and coaching clients all over the world, my friendships in the USA and in other countries, and my travels abroad have demonstrated that while there are many possible different perspectives on such experiences, human anguish and fear are anywhere and everywhere. We live with the threats of nuclear wars, high electronic magnetic pulse (HEMP) attacks, volcanoes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, calamitous infectious diseases, and even alien attacks from other planets.

What’s a poor girl to do? Even more complicated, what’s a psychologically minded person to do? Especially someone like me, a senior psychoanalyst, who can accelerate a fear fantasy and accelerate it at a speed of zero to 90 miles per hour in one minute. As anyone reading this knows, we all differ in the ways we imagine and intrapsychically “process” the feelings that accompany fear—both of things that are happening and of things that have not yet occurred.

Some people reduce the resulting fear, anger, or rage by sharing their feelings with others who are empathic and can understand, validate, and brainstorm solutions. Others cringe at “too much empathy.” Patients and friends say that talking about feelings sometimes makes them feel worse. They want to find a solution to “fix” their fears and get rid of them. They may prefer cognitive and behavioral techniques (mantras, meditation, music, exercise, hobbies, work) or compulsions (substance abuse, overeating, workaholism, self-harm, or even homicide).

However, usually people who seek insight psychotherapy find comfort and healing in free association without judgment. Like me, they prefer to explore their feelings, thoughts, and fantasies even when they are frightening, strange, unrealistic, or perverse. Then they “brainstorm,” often with another person, to analyze the possibility or probability that their

concerns and fears will be realized. But those analyses, and the “fixes” that present themselves, require as much attention as the original fear itself.

Chicken Little—Is the Sky Really Falling?

In the childhood fable, an acorn falls from a tree and hits Chicken Little (originally known as “Henny Penny”) on the head. She thinks it’s a piece of sky and is scared to death that the sky is falling. Terrified, she announces this belief to her friends on the farm, spreading dread and terror among them. They never even question her “news.”

So, she sets off with them—Cocky Locky, Ducky Lucky (Ducky Daddles in the original version), Goosey Loosey, and Turkey Lurkey—to warn the king that the sky is falling. On their way, they meet Foxy Loxy, a cunning animal who suggests a shortcut to speed up their desperate errand. But the shortcut turns out not to be to the king's palace, but to Foxy's own den, where he ambushes them and eats them, one by one. Chicken Little survives, but only because Cocky Locky manages to send her a warning before Foxy Loxy takes the bite that kills him. The king remains in the dark about this imagined catastrophe. Only those who set out in a panic to warn him suffer. The moral of the story is to not let fear and inaccurate beliefs lead us to dangerous conclusions. Blindly taking someone’s word about a threat, and relying on ill-considered advice about it, can be dangerous and even life-threatening. Specifically, it is a warning that mass hysteria is more dangerous to the mass that believes it, than the perceived threat itself.

Revisiting this childhood lesson about how to deal— and not deal— with fear even when it feels like the sky is falling helped me to better understand how I connect my fears— intrapsychic, interpersonal, community, political, and world fears— with reality. It reminds me of how important it is to think critically, research information, and not jump to conclusions when I read, hear, or even imagine frightening information.

What if the Sky is Really Falling? Can We Save the Day?

In short, sometimes the sky is not really falling. Sometimes exaggerating one’s fears and jumping to conclusions about whom to trust ends in disaster. Critical thinking is a vital skill. However, we can’t always know if that thing that just hit us on the head was really a portent of disaster or just an acorn from a nearby tree. What if it were a bomb, a tornado, a drone, a crashing building, or a shower of bullets? What if a black mole on your face is not only a “ditzel,” but a melanoma that has metastasized to a brain tumor? These kinds of questions, and these kinds of dangers, arise all the time. Can we save ourselves? Can we be saved? If yes, how? If not, why not?

But sometimes the sky is falling, and we see only pretty clouds until it is too late to save the day. Critical thinking is as important to prevent danger as it is to prevent the terror that precedes danger. There is another version of the Chicken Little Story that highlights the intent of a sadistic Foxy Loxy who uses psychology to exploit others. It reflects the psychology of our frightened and frightening world.

In 1943, Disney used the Chicken Little story in a cartoon film of that name to show world evils. There is a narrator who introduces the audience to the animals at the local poultry farm. He tells the story that everyone is content with their lives and knows they are well protected.

Then Foxy Loxy appears. He uses his psychology manual to learn how to manipulate the animals in their protected pen, starting with the least intelligent one. He identifies Chicken Little

(who is now a he) as the one to exploit. When Foxy reads instructions to tell a big lie, he drops a piece of wood (shaped like a star) on his head and convinces Chicken Little to run for his life because a thunderstorm is coming. Chicken Little panics, alarms his friends who also panic and follows Foxy Loxy's advice to run to the cave where Foxy eats them.

The last scene depicts a pot-bellied Foxy Loxy picking his teeth and arranging the wishbones of the devoured birds in a row in what looks like a war cemetery. The narrator then declares he is shocked and says this is not how things were supposed to end. Foxy Loxy appears smoking a victory cigar sitting upon a psychology book. He smugly and proudly tells the narrator not to believe everything he reads.

This 1943 anti-Nazi film's warning is painfully relevant today. To me, Vladimir Putin is Foxy Loxy, and President Donald Trump is Chicken Little AND Foxy Loxy. Kamala Harris and many others warned us that if we elected Donald Trump, who was an indicted criminal and sexual abuser, we would be subject to all the goals in Project 2025. Too many voters ignored the clear and present danger in which we are now living. Too many ignored the thousands of lies, that the election was bought, and that the United States Constitution and democracy as we have known it were being overturned. I believe the sky is falling. Many in the media, in publications, organized protests, and politically are applying critical thinking by analyzing what went wrong, why, and suggesting actions and solutions to stop the authoritarianism, theocracy, and kakistocracy. Whether critical thinking and action can save the day remains to be seen.

Help, Healing, or Hospice—Reality Sucks Sometimes

One can address situations that evoke frightening and angry feelings and thoughts with critical thinking individually and at an intrapsychic level. After becoming aware and conscious of feelings, thoughts, and fantasies, which are often frightening or unacceptable, one must stop and think; only then is it possible to reduce or eradicate the anxiety associated with them.

When critical thinking is not sufficient, especially when fear is a realistic response to actual threat, it may be wise to add healthful techniques for managing anxiety. These may include, but are not limited to, autosuggestion, hypnotic havening techniques, meditation, music, exercise, nutrition, and psychotropic medication when prescribed.

When Chicken Little set out to warn the king the sky was falling, all the farm friends she met along the way asked to come along. A psychoanalyst might suggest and interpret that each of these animals had such an unquestioning and trusting positive transference to Chicken Little that it caused them to support her blindly, rather than to consider what she said in a more measured way. One would have to know the history of the farmyard to understand Chicken Little's magnetism and ability to persuade. Without that, all we have are our own speculations, imaginings, projections, or educated guesses as to how come Cocky, Ducky, Goosey, and Turkey acted as birds of a feather and marched in step together.

People are also inclined to act like these storybook birds of a feather. This is a frightening and frightened world. To counter its psychological effects, a measured, systematic, and scientific approach makes sense. This is essential, whether overwhelming anxiety is due to the real and existential threats of what is actually happening—or to one's imagining terrifying possibilities.

Interpersonal support systems and peer groups, networks of family and friends, and professional therapy groups are all excellent paths for coping with the overwhelming stressors that induce anger, anxiety, and fear, if they do not function like Chicken Little's friends! They are

available through religious organizations, psychological and psychiatric associations, medical professionals, and on websites that online research can discover.

At the community level in the United States, there are hundreds of associations and groups for people who want or need assistance. There are online platforms and in person meetings for people of almost any ethnic or racial background, sexual or political orientation, and generation or gender. Because we live in an age of misinformation, disinformation, and online Internet platforms that build fears, it is more important than ever to question and check out facts and the veracity of whatever you read or are told. We must learn whether we are following someone wiser than Chicken Little.

Sometimes it feels and is almost impossible to distinguish whether a group is run by Chicken Littles, Foxy Loxys, or by people with fierce attachments and transferences. Sometimes it's easy, especially when fatigued or busy, to push send and pass on a conspiracy forward on the internet. This is when putting on brakes and critical thinking are especially important. Researching online websites to fact check (e.g., Snopes.com), consulting with professionals and experts, and checking with knowledgeable friends are essential.

Finally, although we may feel helpless to change the world or to effect world peace, we are still able to write and call leaders to petition and urge healthful and reasonable policies and practices. Since we have political, religious, or cult leaders who are Chicken Littles or Foxy Loxies, who promise what cannot be delivered, we must pay careful attention. We lose our heads when we put them in the sand. We court danger when we believe lying, corruption, or hope that impossible promises are real.

Fortunately, there is evidence in both history and current events that mass protests and organized actions can promote cultural equity and equality. We are still able to join and donate to groups that fit our causes and promote healing. Feeling and thinking we are helpless does not necessarily mean that we are helpless.

There is a most important message we can glean from those who have survived holocausts, genocidal wars, prison, and nuclear, weather, or fire disasters. That is, we must maintain hope, do everything healthful possible to maintain soul and sanity, and solve the situation. This requires critical thinking, asking for help from others and offering it in return, and not giving up. Even when one is in palliative care or hospice, we have a choice between surrendering to anxiety and fear, wallowing in despair, or traveling the path wherever it may lead with dignity and hope.

Judith Logue, PhD, is a senior psychoanalyst and professional coach in practice for 50 years. She is a co-founder of the Institute for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy of NJ, a former board member of two divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA), past Director at Large, and current Alternate Director on the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsA) BOD. She publishes book reviews, book chapters, and papers in professional journals. She may be contacted at judith@judithlogue.com. □