

# Let's reset the doomsday clocks in our lives



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USA TODAY

My first nuclear nightmare shook me awake one night when I was in elementary school in the 1970s. Five decades later, I still recall an image from that dream – I'm running in terror with other children on the school playground after we've been told of our imminent doom.

My last atomic dream was scorched into my memory as an adult – I am driving away from my college campus when a mushroom cloud erupts in the eastern sky.

My generation was programmed to fear the nuclear apocalypse, but we were neither the first nor the last to be conditioned to believe that the end is near. From *The Doomsday Clock* to *"The Last of Us,"* it seems we're always 90 seconds from midnight.

It's not that we lack from real danger – war, famine, disease, drought and atmospheric rivers continue to plague us, and likely always will. Yet I've learned to be leery of those who gaze into a cloudy future and speak with certainty about distant days.

## Prophets of doom profit from fear

A lot of money, fame and power can be had in the present by peddling dark visions of what lies in the future. And a lot of false prophets are willing to profit from our fear.

In high school, I read *"The Population Bomb,"* a bestseller that predicted hundreds of millions would starve to death in the 1970s because of overpopulation. The book's author, Stanford University entomologist Paul Ehrlich, became a minor celebrity, even sitting next to Johnny Carson on *"The Tonight Show"* set shortly before the first Earth Day in 1970.

It turned out to be fictitious nonfiction, of course. Global population has grown from 3.7 billion in 1970 (at the height of the book's influence) to 8 billion today.

At the same time, life expectancy across the planet has increased from 56 years in 1970 to more than 73 years today. And the United Nations projects



**Nuclear war and climate change are the main dangers our world faces. The Doomsday Clock, a decadeslong project of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists featuring a clock face where midnight represents Armageddon, moved forward from 100 seconds to midnight to 90 seconds on Tuesday.** IAN TYAS/HULTON ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES

that humans will live on average to be almost 82 years old by this century's end.

As a young adult in the '80s, I heard peers say it would be irresponsible to bring children into a world on the brink of nuclear annihilation and mass starvation. I hear such concerns echoed now by new generations who've been taught to fear the future.

But what if – and this will be hard for some even to contemplate – we're living not in the end of days but the best of days? If you doubt that is the case, point to the period of history when life was safer, more prosperous and held more opportunities for more of humanity. (Hint: It didn't exist.)

Yes, all things may fall apart and the

center not hold. Perhaps, eventually, such things are inevitable.

But I suspect that the children of today – like my own generation – will in time look back and say: We made it. And the journey was not nearly as bad as we feared.

## 'It's gone so fast'

None of this is meant to dismiss the dangers the world faces. War, in Ukraine or another part of the world, may spiral out of control. Another pandemic may be even worse than the current one. We may fail to adapt to climate change aggressively enough to forestall devastating consequences.

But living in fear isn't the way for-

ward. And giving credence to the merchants of apocalypse comes at a prohibitive cost.

Days after my mother was diagnosed with the cancer that would soon claim her life, I was alone with my father. "It's gone so fast," he said.

I realized he was talking about his life with my mother. He was 89 at the time. They had been married for 68 years.

These days, I recall that conversation when I think about the future.

Life is short – even when it's relatively long. We don't need to fear what may come. We have more than enough of the good, bad and in between to embrace today.

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