

## I HAD A DREAM

Stewart Hendrickson

June, 1, 2020, Seattle

Recently I had a dream. It was in that nebulous time between sleep and consciousness. It had a vivid image, which I can still see in my mind, in full color. I was on a boat caught in a terrible storm in the middle of the ocean. As the boat was tossed about by wind and waves, people were trying to save the vessel from impending disaster. They were running about trying to drop the sails, dismast, keep from broaching, all to no avail. It seemed that nothing could be done to save the boat and the people on it. We were all going down. As I began to gain consciousness, I saw this as a metaphor for our current impending natural disasters: COVID-19, and climate change.



There may be many factors contributing to this disaster at sea. The boat was not built to withstand such a storm, or not properly maintained. The crew did not heed the recent weather report before leaving its safe harbor. The crew was inept. The blame cannot be placed on the storm. The storm had no intent to harm the boat or the people on board. It was simply the result of a complex act of nature, following all the laws of physics, due to some random event. It couldn't be reasoned with or mitigated by some supernatural power. Mother nature does what mother nature wants to do.

Natural disasters occur for many reasons. Some are due to our own neglect. We don't maintain our defenses. We don't listen to reasoned or scientific advice. We accept fate as inevitable – “Que Sera, Sera.” Others occur for no predictable reason: an unknown asteroid or meteor, an earthquake, a tornado, or any other random event. We have an ability to protect against the former. For the latter, we need to react immediately or face dire consequences. We cannot be just spectators, we need to act.

If we don't heed the warnings – pandemics are regular occurrences in world history and need to be planned for, and climate change is due to our own neglect of our environment, and can be mitigated only up to a certain point – we will find ourselves in the same situation as that boat in a storm at sea. There comes a point beyond which there's nothing we can do to stop an impending disaster. We can only act before that point is reached. When will we act?

*Stewart Hendrickson is Professor Emeritus (chemistry), St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; and Research Professor Emeritus (chemistry), University of Washington, Seattle, WA. He currently lives in Seattle, WA.*