

William Falk -- Looking at 2010

Looking back over 12 months of human folly, as we do at *The Week* at this time each year, is a perilous exercise. It can shake one's faith in the long-term viability of our species. Economic chaos, political deadlock, religious and ethnic conflict, another awful season for my Mets – what a mess. And yet ... In defiance of both evidence and reason, I cling to the conviction that human beings have a spark of the transcendent within us, and that we are part of the unfolding of something wonderful and mysterious. Here and there, I see encouraging signs and portents. Did you notice, for example, that this year bacteria learned to live on arsenic?

It may sound irrelevant, but hear me out. NASA scientists trained a hardy species of bacteria to survive without phosphorous, which was supposed to be one of the six essential building blocks of life. In just a few months, the bacteria learned to replace the phosphorous in their DNA with arsenic, ordinarily a toxin. NASA pronounced the transformed bacteria a new form of life, whose existence points to even stranger biochemistries on other planets.

But I saw the experiment as something else: a metaphor. (I have a weakness for metaphors.) Even in the most poisonous environment, this little experiment proved, life finds a way. It survives. It thrives – impelled onward by something defying rational explanation. George Bernard Shaw called it the Life Force; call it what you will. But this astonishing persistence, this upward, Promethean striving from the muck, is no accident. It speaks of a purpose and a destiny. It suggests that all our struggling is not for naught. Or so, at year's end, I'd prefer to believe.

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