



the crisis crisis

by Tom Bender

We have an energy crisis, right? There's a crisis in the Middle East, right? Or in Southeast Asia, or on a street corner in New York? There's a crisis everywhere and every minute, if you listen to the media or to the exhortations of many public officials.

But what is a crisis? A crisis is only a problem that supposedly is so critical and requires such drastic action that we must immediately throw all our forces into the fray, suspend any critical examination of the situation and ACT!

Who can declare a crisis? You can, or I can, but usually we don't bother, as the problems are usually our own and we're too busy dealing with them to bother with declarations. But if you'd write down who declared each of the crises you hear about in a 24-hour period, you'll probably find out that either (1) the media, or (2) public officials declared almost all of them.

Who said they could? No one. But the media knows that crises get the attention of listeners and readers and sell newspapers and get audience ratings. And public officials know that crises are Important for bureaucracies because only large institutions can act largely and uncritically to deal with problems. If a problem is a Crisis, then it's unquestionable that government must ACT, and set up commissions, and make decisions and spend money without our interrupting them with questions or alternatives or anything. Time, you know, is all too Important in dealing with crises. And whoever first discovered the crisis gets a pat on the back and a lot of attention for their diligence.

Wouldn't it be easier if we didn't have crises all the time? Sure would—we could relax a little, and try to get a sense of the whole situation, other people's viewpoints and ideas, have time and attention to figure out the real causes of problems, and maybe even go fishing once in awhile.

But how could we get rid of crises? Well, the Type I crises are real easy to get rid of—you just turn off the radio, tell the newspaper carrier not to deliver the front section of the paper, get a timer to turn off the TV at news time, and head out to the nearest trout stream. Trout, you know, are well known for their ability to keep you up on the really important things that you wouldn't hear about anyhow from your neighbors, co-workers, or friends. And because of the shape of their mouths, trout can't pronounce the word Crisis.

Then, do you remember that list of a day's crises you made? Look at it again and see what you did about any of them or could do about any of them. Nothing? Turns out they're mostly other people's problems that you listened to so you could feel anxious, or worried, or concerned, or so your ulcer could keep in shape. When in the last 3000 years have Middle East countries NOT been fighting? What could you do about that plane crash in Portugal? When you think of it, what of our crisis actions against urban problems, pollution, poverty, or toilet paper shortages have had any real effect? And letting go of Type I Crises saves us the problem of picking up last week's paper by mistake and worrying about the wrong crisis in the wrong country.

What about Type II Crises? They're a little harder to deal with, because you have to tell someone that their crisis was a case of mistaken identity. It may have been a dead fish, or their pants were on backwards, or they had their belt too tight, but it certainly couldn't have been a crisis. They haven't been seen around here for years. There may be a problem, but that's something we can sit down and figure out and maybe take care of ourselves. You may even have to make Crisis a no-no word, but it's worth it. Without our attention and meddling, many crises either go away, like itching mosquito bites, or are taken care of by the people they affect.

Would eliminating crises have any harmful and lasting side effects? It might put a few crisis management consultants out of work, but they could be put to work cleaning the trout. Studies made in countries that have outlawed crises have found a pronounced decrease in rate of government activity and inactivity, subnormal anxiety rates in the public-at-large, and a significant decrease in inability to solve problems, but such symptoms did not seem to cause any lasting problems to society.

... Since we eliminated crises, we have discovered that we really do live in pretty good times. The fishing is good, it is good to be able to focus on real, affectable problems and solve them, and lots of rewarding things are around to learn and do, once we relax and quit worrying so much. Sure don't miss the good old days, and all those ... what did they call them?