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# Go Easy on the Panic Button, Nostradamus

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Anybody who has been in the trends business as long as I have (nearly three decades) has mixed feelings about Nostradamus. There's respect for the fact that a French seer born in the boonies in 1503 is still creating buzz five centuries on. There's envy over his unearthly medieval toolkit, which included not just an actual crystal ball but also necromancy, astrology and a smattering of other Dumbledorean techniques. And there's a touch of annoyance that people confuse the prophesying he did with what we do, which is trendspotting—an art and science centered on cultural scans and requiring copious legwork (both virtual and real).

Nostradamus is on my mind because his name has become a kind of shorthand for the imminent threat of bad stuff happening. For me, hearing his name more than once in a week is a reminder to check the Doomsday Clock—which, as it turns out, now stands at two and a half minutes to midnight, 30 seconds closer than last year. So, what's new to worry about this year?

The specter of nuclear war is back as North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and President Donald Trump trash talk each other and flash their nuclear muscles. The U.S. president's tweet-warnings about having a "bigger & more powerful" nuclear button than Jong-un and about putting into motion "fire and the fury like the world has never seen" has prompted high-level concerns on both sides of the aisle about fidgety fingers near America's nuclear launch codes.

Then there's all that extreme weather, which some attribute to climate change and others to divine punishment. Either way, the ride is getting wild. Speaking of bombs, a "bomb cyclone" is all set to drop on the Northeast, leaving it in white-out conditions and with potential power failures. Meanwhile, cities along the Gulf Coast still struggle to recover from the massive rain dump of Hurricane Harvey in September—the third "500-year flood" in three years. The situation in Puerto Rico is even direr in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Wildfires—which in October raged through Northern California, causing an estimated \$3 billion of damage—returned with a fury in the southern part of the state, driven by powerful Santa Ana winds.

Crime is a perennial worry for Americans, but it's not the mass shootings and other acts of violence that concern us most. Gallup reports that this year again, Americans' crime worries are topped not by terrorism (30 percent) but by cybercrime—whether it's having sensitive information stolen (67 percent) or being the victim of identity theft (66 percent). These have been leading concerns since 2009, but cyber-insecurity has been ramped up over the past 18 months by reports of Russian hacking of the 2016 election. If the U.S. electoral system isn't safe, what hope have we for our retirement funds?

And speaking of finance ... Ten years since the first rumblings of the subprime crisis, money is an enduring worry for many Americans. And now experts are issuing warnings that the sequel to the global financial crisis is here. If (when?) the markets for collateralized loan obligations do collapse, as they did in the 2008 financial crisis, today's ultra-high-frequency electronic trading systems make it likely to happen in milliseconds. That's scary enough in itself without factoring in the possibility that it could be triggered by hostile individuals or states deliberately hacking into the system as an act of cyberwarfare.

Even if the financial system manages to hold firm, there's the widely covered prospect of artificial intelligence taking over life as we know it—a prospect that Elon Musk famously sees as a bigger risk than North Korea. In his latest bestseller, *Homo Deus*, influential author Yuval Noah Harari envisions a future dominated by machines. Since “99 percent of human qualities and abilities are simply redundant for the performance of most modern jobs,” Harari sees computer algorithms outperforming humans across a whole range of work. One consequence could be what Harari calls a “useless class” of people who will be not only unemployed but unemployable.

Even this brief scan of the status quo in early 2018 shows there's more than enough to get anxious fingers reaching for the panic button. But are things riskier now than in Nostradamus's time, when life was fraught with plagues, famine and war? Or riskier than a century ago, when a simple cut could lead to a deadly infection and average life expectancy in the U.S. was just 48.4 years for men and 54.0 for women? Our take is that the everyday life of the average American scores pretty low on the old-style threat-o-meter, but instant communication, combined with a fevered 24/7 news cycle, makes for a pretty constant feed of anxiety-inducing information that is addictive and great for ratings. The trend is clear: steadily growing anxiety with occasional spikes of full-on panic.