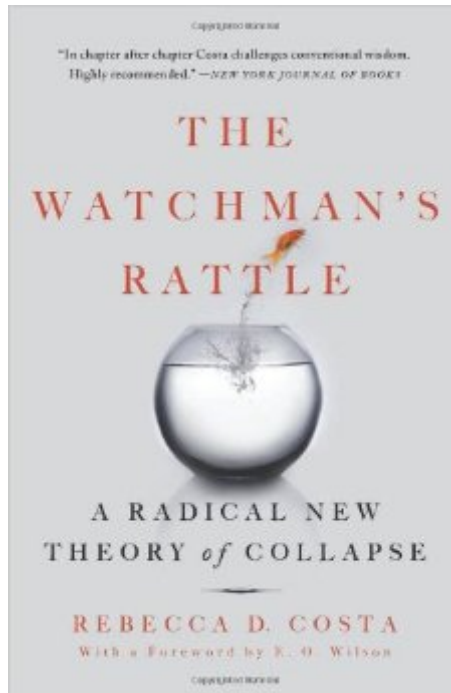


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# The Watchman's Rattle: A Radical New Theory Of Collapse



## Synopsis

Why can't we solve our problems anymore? Why do threats such as the Gulf oil spill, worldwide recession, terrorism, and global warming suddenly seem unstoppable? Are there limits to the kinds of problems humans can solve? Rebecca Costa confronts - and offers a solution to - these questions in her highly anticipated and game-changing book, *The Watchman's Rattle*. Costa pulls headlines from today's news to demonstrate how accelerating complexity quickly outpaces that rate at which the human brain can develop new capabilities. With compelling evidence based on research in the rise and fall of Mayan, Khmer, and Roman empires, Costa shows how the tendency to find a quick solution - leads to frightening long term consequence: Society's ability to solve its most challenging, intractable problems becomes gridlocked, progress slows, and collapse ensues. A provocative new voice in the tradition of thought leaders Thomas Friedman, Jared Diamond and Malcolm Gladwell, Costa reveals how we can reverse the downward spiral. Part history, part social science, part biology, *The Watchman's Rattle* is sure to provoke, engage, and incite change.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *The Watchman's Rattle: Thinking Our Way Out of Extinction*, Rebecca D. Costa gives us the following premise: that as societies advance they invariably run up against a cognitive threshold, "the point at which a society can no longer think its way out of its problems." This seems bizarre on the face of it because how else can you solve problems but by thinking? But she offers an alternative: insight. In contrast to left- and right-brain thinking, which have us search through

pre-existing solutions and problem solving techniques, insight seems to occur to us out of thin air (though usually after the correct mental preparation). Insight, Costa claims, is "evolution's gift to us." Once Costa has introduced the idea of insight being the solution to our problems and points out that many people already do have answers, she asks, what stands in our way from acting on these solutions? Costa says that what stands in our way of acting on good, insightful solutions are supermemes. Supermemes are ideas that have such strong support or opposition that the mere mention of them clouds peoples' thinking or prevents people from even looking at alternatives. (An example she uses of an insightful solution for global warming, for example, is that of releasing sulfur dioxide into the stratosphere to form sulfate particles that would, in effect, shade the earth. The reason this solution is saved as a last resort, I've heard, is because there is much worry about whether we could tip the environment too much the wrong way and lose control of our planet's temperature.

Rebecca D. Costa thinks about the big picture. What is wrong with our planet, and what, if anything, can we do about it? This is a huge bite to chew on, yet Ms. Costa does a commendable job of looking at our most serious problems in innovative ways. She takes on global warming, terrorism, economic recession, depleted resources, and nuclear proliferation. Applying evolution, history, psychology, politics, and economics, she helps us understand why we are so screwed up. Costa's thesis is that conditions are evolving faster than our brains, so we are unable, with our limited gray matter, to solve the problems of an incredibly complex world. She gives us a history lesson in how the Mayan, Roman, and Khmer empires crashed because as each society grew in complexity, the fallible human beings that ran the show were unable to adapt. Instead of basing their solutions on knowledge and fact, they substituted theological and other irrational belief systems that masked their sense of fear and impotence, giving false hope and leading to catastrophe. Costa observes that humans still don't take the time to distinguish facts from beliefs. Her example is the decision to attack Iraq because of "weapons of mass destruction." In retrospect, we know that the WMD theory was bogus and that a major decision with world-shaking consequences was made without verification of the facts. One of my favorite parts of *WATCHMAN'S RATTLE* is the chapter that explains how our culture is addicted to "irrational opposition." Listen to your average politician, says Costa, and what you hear is a lot of opposition to any and all ideas but very little in the way of constructive solutions. Ms.

The author presents a convincing argument in which she lays out the way in which humans adopt

beliefs in lieu of facts when faced with the insurmountable complexity of highly developed societies. These beliefs in turn get canonized into Supermemes which prevent societies from making progress and eventually result in their collapse. She recognizes five Supermemes that we must overcome: irrational opposition, personalization of blame, silo thinking and extreme economics. She argues that the key to overcoming these obstacles is the human ability of insight. That is it in a nutshell and she is drawing on some great sources here, Tainter among others, but then she takes a turn for the worse when she begins to propose ways out of our current predicament. She tells us that we should begin by employing short term mitigations which will bide us time until we can discover long term solutions. This mitigation requires us to incrementally apply a wide array of solutions at the same time, and she gives a few examples of how this might be done. Everything seems somewhat plausible until she takes a gigantic moon leap (that puts the goldfish on the cover to shame) and proposes that the long term solutions will come from the next stage in human evolution - insight, which she describes as "aha" moments, like when Newton suddenly connected the dots in his mind to come up with gravitational theory. She goes on to propose that this evolution can be sped along via the field of neuroscience, which will allow us to eventually have insight on demand. After this is accomplished she seems to suggest that complexity will no longer be an issue and that collapse can be forestalled indefinitely.

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