

The Skin of Our Teeth (from a 2010 blog found in 2012)

I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for. ~ Thornton Wilder, *The Skin of Our Teeth*

The world is a scary place. We read newspapers, watch TV, and consume web media voraciously with the hope that given enough information, somehow we will understand the threats that seem to surround us. But reading about wars in far-away places, environmental disasters close to home, and endless political infighting often leaves us feeling even more helpless to understand. Surely things have never been this bad before?

Audiences on October 15, 1942 may well have shared that sentiment. Less than a year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Thornton Wilder dared to open a play that was described by the New York Time's Brooks Atkinson as "one of the wisest and friskiest comedies written in a long time." The subject matter? Nothing less than life, death and the end of the world.

Act One of *The Skin of Our Teeth* finds the four members of the Antrobus family facing impending environmental disaster in the form of freakishly cold weather in July. An enormous wall of ice is moving toward their suburban home in Excelsior New Jersey. By the end of the act, Mrs. Antrobus is imploring the audience members to pass up their seat cushions to be used as fuel to keep the home fires burning. Act Two finds the family still alive and intact on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, but this time the threat to the family comes from within, in the form of a gold-digging beauty queen who has her eye on Mr. Antrobus. But before her plan comes to fruition, an epic storm arrives to destroy all living creatures on earth; fortunately the Antrobus family takes refuge on a large boat, along with a whole lot of animals. Act Three finds the family split apart at the end of a long-running war that appears to have engulfed the entire US, splitting Americans into warring factions, with Mr. Antrobus and his son on opposing sides. And yet, by the end of the play, the Antrobus family has been reunited, and Mr. Antrobus vows to begin once again to rebuild the world.

In 2010, *The Skin of Our Teeth* strikes me as eerily prescient. Written in the midst of World War II, Wilder manages to capture the broad range of threats to humankind, both those that attack us from outside and those we find within ourselves. Mr. Antrobus makes plenty of mistakes. (Did I mention that his name means "human" in Greek?) But in spite of his mistakes, Mr. Antrobus continues to struggle on, buoyed by his belief that he has a greater purpose, and he must continue to work to improve the world, not only for his family but for all people.

Posted by [Darcy Rice](#) at [10:56 AM](#) 

from **Skin of Our Teeth, Act 3**

Bailey: "After experience had taught me that the common occurrences of daily life are vain and futile and I saw that all the objects of my desire and fear were in themselves nothing good nor bad save insofar as the mind was affected by them; I at length determined to search out whether there was something truly good and communicable to man." Spinoza

Hester: "Then tell me, O Critias, how will a man choose the ruler that shall rule over him? Will he not choose a man who has first established order in himself, knowing that any decision that has its spring from anger or pride or vanity can be multiplied a thousand fold in its effects upon the citizens?" Plato

Ivy: "This good estate of the mind possessing its object in energy we call divine. This we mortals have occasionally and it is this energy which is pleasantest and best. But God has it always. It is wonderful in us; but in him how much more wonderful." Aristotle

Termayne: "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth; and the Earth was waste and void; And the darkness was upon the face of the deep. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." (Genesis 1)

A few related quotes:

"In spite of everything, life is good." Hendrik Van Loon

"Life consists not simply in what heredity and environment do to us but in what we make out of what they do to us."
Henry Emerson Fosdick

"Life is easier than you'd think; all that is necessary is to accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, and bear the intolerable." Kathleen Norris

"Literature in the orchestration of platitudes." Thornton Wilder