

"It Was the End of the World, and We Feel Fine"

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January 13, 2013

For the last six months or so, I've been doing gratitude meditations almost every day. I take some time out and run through all the good luck and good fortune and blessings in my life, which is a very long list. But ever since December 22, I've been feeling especially lucky. Along with everyone else, I've just dodged the end of the world as we know it—again. In fact, over my lifetime, I've escaped the end of world, the destruction of Planet Earth, the end of civilization, the final apocalypse, and/or being left behind after the Rapture, at least two hundred times.

Human beings have been predicting and expecting the end of the world for millennia. The Romans, for example, feared that Rome would come to disaster on various significant dates counted from the founding of the city. Comets, eclipses and natural events like volcanoes and tsunamis were often interpreted as signs that the end of everything was at hand, until it became obvious that it wasn't and people calmed down.

But apocalyptic fervor really took off with Christianity. The End of Days was a central principle of the entire early Christian faith. According to Chapter 24 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself predicted disasters and catastrophes just before the coming of The Son of Man, the Messiah. Matthew 24:34 quotes Jesus as saying, "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished."

So, Christians in the first century fully expected the Second Coming to occur within their lifetimes, because that is what they had been told. The Revelation of St. John was only one of several texts from that time period which described in vivid and blood-curdling detail all the horrible events which would presage the return of Christ. But by the third or fourth century CE, the Church had to do some spin on the phrasing of Matthew 24:34. It was obvious that some of those words, like "this generation" or "shall not pass away" required some creative interpretation. Nevertheless, this chapter of the Bible fixed the Christian view that The End could come at any moment, and was more likely to be sooner than later.

Up to the twentieth century, virtually all the apocalyptic predictions and movements were based in Christian theology and the Bible. There were hundreds of them. Some of them predicted the Rapture, when believers would be taken into Heaven and Christ would establish his Kingdom of glory. Others focused mainly on the "tribulation" that would precede that: devastating events such as plagues, earthquakes, and wars, including the last and greatest of all wars, Armageddon, which no one would win or survive. In 1524, Christian astrologers in England forecast a world-terminating flood and scared 20,000 Londoners into evacuating their homes, while one clergyman built a fortress and stockpiled food and water.

However, most of these predictions didn't attract widespread attention. Small sects or local communities surrounding the prophet may have panicked, but for the most part, everyday life was hard enough to keep the average person preoccupied. For example, there's very little evidence for a widespread sense of doom leading up to the year 1000, despite dozens of forecasts by clerics and mystics that Christ would surely return that year. Most people at that time were illiterate and weren't even aware of what calendar year it was.

But that all changed in the modern era. As communication improved, so did the spread of misinformation, false fears and delusions. Doomsday prophets used to rely on little treatises and pamphlets, or individual sermons. But by the 19th century, they could write books or newspaper articles that reached thousands of readers. In the 20th century, they could broadcast on radio and television and reach millions. In the 1990s, the Internet was invented. Suddenly that fellow walking around with the sign saying "the end is nigh," had put down his sign and launched a website.

The year 2000 had been pinpointed in Christian apocalyptic prophecies since the 13th century, with Sir Isaac Newton and 18th century theologian Jonathan Edwards among its proponents. The 1990s paranoia about the so-called Y2K bug crashing all our computer systems was often framed as another part of God's retribution for our pride. In fact, IT specialists had seen this complication coming years earlier and invested huge amounts of time and money fixing computer code, and they get very little credit for it.

I remember Y2K vividly. I was working in a battered women's shelter and I was on shift that New Year's Eve. The agency was in turmoil; a lot of the shelter staff had resigned, including the brand new shelter manager who'd lasted about two weeks. I had purchased some emergency supplies for the shelter,

like bottled water, a camp stove, flashlights and batteries, but neither the agency nor the women in the shelter were very concerned. One of the women was absolutely confident that civilization would grind to a halt at midnight. "There won't be any electricity, the TV will go off, nothing will run on a computer," she told us. Only two of the women stayed up until midnight on what was arguably the most momentous New Year's Eve any of us would live to see. I had gotten special permission for us to have a little sparkling wine, in honor of the occasion. We watched the TV coverage of Boston's celebrations, toasted the new year, and they went to bed. None of us suspected that 21 months later, on September 11, something would permanently change our lives more than any Y2K bug could possibly have done.

The 2012 Phenomenon, as it's been called, diverged from the Christian roots of the past 2000 years of doomsday predictions. Maybe that explains why it took on such magnitude. Supposedly based on the ancient Mayan calendar, it was universal, multi-cultural and non-partisan. An Ipsos international poll in May of last year found that an average of roughly 10 percent of the people polled in 20 different countries believed that the world would end in 2012.

It all started in 1905, when an amateur named John T. Goodman, a friend of Mark Twain, published his correlation of the Mayan calendar with the modern one. The Mayan calendar was built up of progressively longer units, ending with the 'bak'tun which was 144,000 days. Thirteen 'bak'tun completed a Long Count, or Great Cycle, of roughly 5,129 years. There's some dispute about the exact dates, but lining up the two calendars with lunar phases and months indicates that the fourth Great Cycle ends right about now, give or take a couple of weeks.

All this was forgotten until 1966 when archeologist Michael Coe published a book on the Maya in which he wrote, "There is a suggestion...that Armageddon would overtake the degenerate peoples of the world and all creation on the final day of the thirteenth ['bak'tun]...our present universe would have been created in 3113 BC, to be annihilated when the Great Cycle of the Long Count reaches completion."

The trouble is, there is no such suggestion in Mayan records at all. The Maya did not predict or expect an apocalypse of any kind, their calendar didn't end with the fourth Long Count, there are projected events far into the future from now in some writings, and as far as we can tell, the end of a Great Cycle was time for a big celebration. As archeologist William Saturno said, "The ancient Maya predicted the world would continue—that 7,000 years from now, things would be exactly like this. We keep looking

for endings. The Maya were looking for a guarantee that nothing would change. It's an entirely different mindset."

And this, of course, is the big point. Our culture is saturated with apocalyptic thinking—we keep looking for endings. The little spark in Michael Coe's book fell into the highly flammable tinder of New Age thinking and fringe millennialism, and so was born the 2012 Phenomenon, with every possible conspiracy theory thrown into the mix. *The Fortean Times* not only devoted an entire issue to the 2012 mania, it continued to feature a regular column about various prophets and their websites through the entire year, and things just got crazier and crazier. While a certain percentage of people proposed that we'd achieve a higher state of consciousness and total harmony with each other and the universe, most of the 2012 seers predicted global cataclysms, including the earth tipping over in orbit and being fried to a crisp by the sun, an unknown planet colliding with us, the earth's magnetic field reversing, or the planet being engulfed by a massive solar flare. NASA played whack-a-mole with all this, trying to individually debunk each scary vision, but they were only preaching to their skeptical choir.

Why do so many people seem to embrace the notion of an apocalypse? There's certainly a fear factor involved, but the extreme popularity of disaster movies, dystopian fantasy and science fiction, and conspiracy theories suggests a strong attraction as well. *Fortean Times* 2012 columnist Peter Brookesmith observed that many of the pundits didn't seem to like their fellow humans or modern society very much. There's a certain wish fulfillment fantasy in many of these predictions—an assumption that the believers will be scooped into a well-earned paradise while the arrogant skeptics and their corrupt, immoral modern world will get their just desserts. Without the mystical elements, post-apocalypse visions are generally all about survival, and imagining that you have the courage, resourcefulness and endurance to live through the worst. But primarily, almost every end times prediction centers on the notion of being, in some sense, the Chosen Ones who will survive, which goes back to early Christianity. It's endemic to the way we think.

The big difficulty with these beliefs is that they stop us from taking action against problems. In the most extreme cases, groups have committed suicide or given up their whole lives to sit on a hilltop waiting for Jesus or the flying saucers to spirit them away. But millions more who wouldn't go that far are like James Watt, Secretary of the Interior under the Reagan administration, who felt that there was no

need to protect the environment for future generations because the end was coming, and told a Congressional Committee in 1981, "I don't know how many future generations we can count on until the Lord returns."

I don't believe in the apocalypse. I agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, "Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning, and under every deep a lower deep opens." And I'm with 19th century naturalist John Muir when he says, "This grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling; vapor is ever rising." I do harbor a fond hope for those magical energy beams lifting us all to a higher consciousness. I like to think that will start manifesting in 2013. But I've been hoping for that since the Harmonic Convergence in 1987—a sort of counter-apocalypse in which thousands of people gathered to meditate during a planetary alignment. I spent that night here in Winchendon, in fact, up in the woods above Lake Monomonac, meditating all night long. The Harmonic Convergence was the brainchild of New Age writer José Arguelles, a major player in promoting the 2012 Phenomenon.

So...welcome, everyone, to the 1st 'bak'tun of the Fifth Great Cycle. We're all still here, no massive natural disasters have occurred and aliens have not invaded, so celebrations are clearly in order. We've only got 5,129 years in this Long Count, so let's make it a good one.