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Reflections on the Ending of the World

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I woke up at 3:33 this morning to confirm that the world was still spinning on its axis and life as we know it would continue for an indeterminate while longer. After several more hours of slumber surrounded by my beloved pets Bonnie, Bacchus and Echo, my thoughts returned to my commitment to prepare an essay for this evening. In that the center of the Mayan world is on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula which is on Eastern Standard Time, the forecasted end of the world would have occurred at 12:10 AM Pacific Standard Time when I was fast asleep and Bonnie and Bacchus were snoring and Echo was running a gentle purr.

I have had a long time connection with the Yucatan having lived in the Mayan village of Mani in 1976 as a budding cultural anthropologist. With a newly minted BA in Anthropology from UC Berkeley I came there to test drive my appetite for doing fieldwork in a remote-feeling location. Mani was the perfect antidote to feminist Berkeley. The women weren't yet uppity and gender roles were firmly fixed with the men working as farmers and ranchers and the women maintaining hearth and home. Grandparents lived doors away from their grandchildren and everyone glowed in the security of being amongst trusted loved ones.

As it turned out Mani also had a rich history. It was the home of the T'utul Xiu Mayan dynasty when it relocated from the ceremonial site of Uxmal in the 13th century. A century and a half later in 1562 the Spanish Friar Diego de Landa lit a huge funeral pyre desecrating numerous Mayan hieroglyphic texts to speed up the adoption of Catholicism. In Mani (as well as much of the rest of the Yucatan) it worked. When I lived there I was engaged in endless conversations about whether *Judios* (Jews) believed in *Jesus Christo* (Jesus Christ). I finally gave in and began taking communion with my newfound friends and family...

Meanwhile, one day Professor Miguel Xiu, who claimed an ancestral connection to Tatal Xiu showed up and offered to take me to the Grutas (caves) of Loltun. Inside we lit candles and watched bats fly and squeak overhead. While the caves were pretty spectacular, I felt wary of Senor Xiu, wondering whether he was just lusting after my 22 year old body or if he was the real deal. In that my hosts in Mani were more concerned with corn farming, cattle ranching and discussing the benefits of handmade tortillas over those fashioned in factories, I dismissed all of the yammer of the ancient Maya.

From a purely economic perspective, in the mid-1970s henequen farming was nearing extinction as nylons and plastics were capturing the satchel and basket markets. Henequen is grown using the slash and burn agricultural system where a field must lie fallow for 25 years before it can be burned and reseeded. In that plastics could be made quickly (and cause endless pollution problems in their inability to decompose), the Yucatan was about to go belly up. While good natured efforts were made in re-educating farmers in improving citrus production, ultimately the Yucatan's cash cow became tourism.

Millions of pesos were directed into reconstructing ceremonial sites like Chichen Itza, Tulum, Uxmal and Coba because of touristic interest. Pricey hotels were built adjacent to the more spectacular sites and then adjacent to the sleepy fishing village of Playa del Carmen, Cancun was invented. I walked on the beaches of Cancun when they really were pristine and only a couple of hotels had been built. Eventually Cancun became THE Yucatan destination and tourists would simply take day-trips out to visit reconstructed archeological sites like Chichen Itza and Tulum.

As for spectacularly important events in world history, some 65 million years ago the Yucatan Peninsula was the site where a super-powerful meteor landed causing a dust cloud so intense that it led to the extinction of many many dinosaurs. Photosynthesis was so inhibited that the foodstuffs large land and avian reptiles depended upon could not grow fast enough to sustain their populations. Ultimately, we humans can thank that meteor for our own emergence as a species. At the time of this Cretaceous/Paleogene event, the only

mammals in existence were very small. As the meteor-induced dust cloud cleared, niches for larger mammals had opened up and by 23 million years ago some of the earliest apes emerged. Then some 5-6 million years ago bipedal apes appeared making way for *Ardipithecus*, the Australopithecine and eventually the genus *Homo*. Our own highly curious, endlessly inventive and incessantly superstitious species, *Homo sapiens* emerged just less than 200,000 years ago.

So what about the Mayan Calendar's prediction of today being the end of the world? Well, in the grand scheme of things it should be regarded as one more superstitious blip, but considering that the economy of the Yucatan is based hugely on tourism, flames were fanned and New Age Shamans were welcomed in. In villages like Mani tonight is simply another night to drink beer and hang out with friends. Professor Xiu, aside, the Mayan astronomers who compiled the *Popol Vuh*, the collection of K'iche Maya creation stories are no longer amongst us. Their descendants were rudely Christianized and the Shamans and Priests conducting "end of the world" rituals at Chichen Itza and Tulum reek of opportunistic charlatanism. The full weekend package was selling for upwards of \$500 (exclusive of hotel and transportation) while tonight's event featuring fun-loving brainy skeptics is free!

The calendar which brought on all of this calamity and touristic opportunism was really an Olmec invention and is known as the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar. It contends that there were three prior worlds that were unsustainable and that life as we know it did not happen until the emergence of the fourth world. Time periods were measured in *b'ak'tuns* and today, December 21, 2012 signifies the end of the 13th *b'ak'tun* or the end of a 5,125 year cycle. In that the world has not ended, if one wants to continue along with the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar, we can now enter the 14th *b'ak'tun* and reinvent our world and ourselves. If the hot tub were hot (my dead cover made it impossible to heat), you could immerse your naked body step out into the freezing cold and imagine being reborn into a better, happier, healthier and wiser person.

Nonetheless we humans with our awareness of the impermanence of person and place have had a longstanding appetite for the notion of Armageddon. While the Mayan astronomers may have simply been noting the end of a cycle, being that their forecast was made about 1750 years ago, our time may have felt so distant that from a 250 AD perspective for all they knew the world could well end at the close of the 13th *b'ak'tun*. We, living in a world that is so replete with change, really do believe we will see the end in our own life times. And we do have evidence. Fifty years ago Rachel Carson penned *Silent Spring*, which foretold the coming desecration of the environment resulting from the use of chemical fertilizers. And today the doomsday she wrote of has truly taken hold. Climate change is a reality; American farmlands have been so leached of nutrients that crops cannot grow without using dangerous supplements while greed-driven corporations like Monsanto have imposed their toxic non-reproductive seeds all over the world.

Someone once told me that life as we know it here in the reasonably comfortable Western World is likely to continue at its current clip for another 40 years. Afterwards resources would be so depleted and the planet so polluted that whoever remained wouldn't have a chance... Unlike the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs, this time the remains of the planet would truly be left to the likes of cockroaches. Farmlands would be desecrated, air impossible to breath (many times worse than India and China today), fossil fuels depleted—efforts at alternative energies stymied by big business, leaving the remaining humans starving and close to death. Selfishly I consider that if I personally were to live to this future doomsday moment, I'd be close to 100 which ought to be a sufficient number of years for any life-loving human. So from my beloved perspective of the anthropologist on the hilltop surveying humanity, I would have personally witnessed a grand panoramic story and feel personally complete. Would that be enough? Does it matter that the world continues after ones' personal physical transition?

My Dad was very practical. When I spoke to him about death a couple of months prior to his passing in 1996 he told me that once a body goes cold, it's all over. To me his meta-message was to enjoy life while you're alive and don't plan on a second chance. Meanwhile, there are whole nations of people planning on being reincarnated. Their letting go of this life remains contingent upon getting a chance at another and another and another life. While such beliefs don't square with my Dad's in-your-face worldview, they nonetheless enable a full engagement of the cycle of life.

These days my mother's 93 year old body is under the custodial care of what I think of as the death industrial complex. As dementia gradually invades her cerebral tissues, she has surrendered to diapering by an attendant who refers to her as her "baby." She lives amongst others, who like her, depend on constant care and supervision by a staff of nurses, aids and attendants. Here in America, one out of every four Medicare dollars, more than \$125 billion annually, are spent on services for 5% of beneficiaries in their last year of life. From a Hindu and a Jain perspective, we are one confused society.

Jains who practice *Santhara* and Hindus who practice *Prayopavesa* engage in a voluntary end of life fast. Participants (about 240 Jains a year) start these fasts once they know that their life's purpose has been served. They declare their intents to their families and communities and take the following 30 or so days to reflect on who they are and where they've been. And when they do let go of their physical bodies it's done with a feeling of completion and serenity.

Our present-time focus on self-aggrandizement has left us clueless for when to face that it's time to surrender to the grand cycle. If we become able to do so, I believe we can then place the attention needed to ensure the continuation of a happy and healthy humanity following our own personal physical transitions.