

Headline: Beginning of the world

Byline: Conrado de Quiros

Published Date: 02:04 AM May 26, 2011

Section: opinion

Word Count: 5882

Content:

THIS WEEK, two things were predicted to happen. One was the end of the world last Saturday, the other was the super-typhoon that was supposed to hit us yesterday. A fitting background to my turning senior citizen tomorrow.

I'm writing this in the morning of Wednesday, and Metro Manila at least has shown little sign of having withstood Nature's fury. Well, maybe things can still change across the length of the day. Life has a way of changing abruptly these days, climate at the head of the line. And the weather of this country of late has been as fickle as, well, politics. Weather-weather lang 'yan applies as much to weather as to politicians.

As to the end of the world, well, news of it has proven to be as grossly exaggerated as Mark Twain's death. Fortunately Harold Camping's oracle wasn't particularly heeded, or even widely known, here. The fellow of course remains unrepentant and says Judgment Day did begin last Saturday, except that it was the spiritual part. The physical part, which would see the actual Rupture happen—doesn't that sound like a virgin losing it?—is still set for next year, in October.

Its hilarious aspects are epic. One worker testified that he didn't bother to go to work over the past weeks because he wouldn't be able to collect his pay after Saturday anyway. And now he has bills to pay. A group, on the other hand, offered to buy the property of all those who bought the prediction as they wouldn't have any use for it anymore. A bright idea, except that if believers in the Rupture had no more use for their property, what use would they have for money if they sold it?

It's funny, but it has its sobering aspects as well.

Not the least of them is that do you really need to believe in a divine hand rupturing the planet or annihilating humanity to wonder if it's not a possibility we ourselves are creating? Natural disasters have always been there, some so apocalyptic as to signal the end of the world as some species have known it. The dinosaurs are no longer there to tell the tale. You watch Discovery Channel and you are going to feel awed, if not terrified, by how tenuous our grasp on life is, given the many threats outer space poses, from floating debris to solar rays. But none of that compares with the biggest threat of all, which is—us. Look how we've treated the planet over the last century and the catastrophic effects that have followed in its wake. I don't know how super the super-storm that will hit us will be. But I do know that the tornado that recently killed 89 people in Joplin, Missouri, was so. I do know that the earthquake that struck Japan, which set off a killer tsunami, was so. And super doesn't begin to describe the cataclysm that visited the place.

Climate change isn't something that threatens us, it is something that engulfs us. Natural disasters have happened before, but they have not happened with the frequency and severity they do today. The wonder of it is that we are not taking the most desperate and strenuous efforts to reverse it, we are merely trying to live with it, hoping the next earthquake, the next cyclone, the next super-storm will happen to somebody else and not to us. Well, may we laugh at batty end-of-the-world prophecies. But we don't repent and change our ways—in ways that go beyond the religious context of those prophecies—we won't have the last laugh.

Quite apart from that, you have to wonder about the attitudes Rupture-type beliefs induce in people. For all Family Radio's battiness, it is not alone in prophesying doomsday. The Mayan calendar,

which sets 2012 as the end of the world as we know it, has its share of believers, and far more plentifully. Just as well, Christians have always believed in the Second Coming, which was first reckoned to happen at the end of the first millennium and, when that didn't take place, at the end of the second. Mayan meets Christian, and you are going to have no small amount of people doing all sorts of bizarre things next year in preparation for doom or deliverance.

While at that, I don't know if we still have our own cults waiting for the flying saucers to land in Banahaw to pluck a chosen few from humanity's impending apocalyptic fate. I wonder if that was what inspired the movie, "Knowing."

But whether religious or secular, it tends to induce selfishness among its believers, a looking out for Number One, a frenetic scrambling for individual salvation. That is quite apart from postulating a jealous god, a vengeful god, a petty god, a god that would reward believers simply for believing—and punish those who do not—and not for living reasonably decent lives. Or lives spent with a thought for others, with a care for others, with concern for others.

I don't know, I'm just shooting the breeze here, my point in life has a way of conducting these vaporous thoughts. Turning 60 isn't exactly the end of the world on an individual, if not planetary plane, but it does send strong intimations of mortality. I am at least thankful that growing old—though I can't for the life of me feel it—or espying personal extinction in the horizon, hasn't made me crave or cling to wealth or power the way it has many people I know. Kung kailan pa tumanda; you can't carry those things to your grave. I am at least thankful that growing old has made me take myself less seriously than ever and appreciate others more deeply than ever. Enough to wonder why, if the end of the world were truly at hand, your first thought should be about yourself and not about those who have barely begun life, not about those you care for or ought to, not about those you love however unlovable they often make themselves out to be.

End of the world? I'm just beginning to glimpse its beginning.

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