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## INTRODUCTION: HOW DYLAN GOT ME STARTED

On December 21, 2012 (or December 23, 2012, depending on how you align their ancient calendar with ours), the odometer of ancient Maya timekeeping known as the Long Count will revert to zero and the cyclic tally of 1,872,000 days (5,125.3661 years) will start all over again. When I first became attracted to Maya studies over forty years ago I could not possibly have imagined that I would write a book about this event. Blame Dylan.

Three years ago I began receiving e-mails from a troubled Canadian high-school student, Dylan Aucoin, from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. He had been reading Web articles about the end of the world that would supposedly fulfill the Maya prophecy about what might accompany the Long Count's great turnover in 2012—or Y12 as I have come to call it. Dylan confided to me that he was worried—at times even horrified—by the predictions he had come across: apocalypse, holocaust, world destruction. After encountering one particularly frightening doomsday article, Dylan asked me:

“Is there anything to fear about 2012 and the New Age ideas of destruction and consciousness shifting? I thought I had it all figured out but this article has brought it back like gangbusters. I ask you, is it worth fretting about? Is there really any validity?”

At first I thought he was putting me on but there was a sense of urgency in the tone of Dylan’s words that spurred me to respond. We began a joint reading program and conversation. I was impressed with Dylan’s motivation to investigate things for himself, a quality I admire when I see it in my students. Dylan told me of an encounter with an old man who came into the Blockbuster store where he worked near Halifax, Nova Scotia. In casual conversation the old man told him his whole family was brilliant, with IQs topping 150 and that he himself was a member of an ancient mystical order that derives its truths from psychic teachings. You had to have “the gift” to know the deepest truths, he told Dylan. Although skeptical, Dylan listened to the end-of-the-world prophecies the old psychic spouted. Dylan told me that whenever someone discusses anything with such passion he gets motivated to investigate the subject. A film buff, Dylan wondered why many famous celebrities bought into the idea of psychic phenomena, especially as they relate to great world transformations—from actress Shirley MacLaine to baseball star Darren Daulton. We discussed actor Billy Bob Thornton’s film *The Gift*, about his mother’s life as a psychic, and the Jim Carrey film *The Number 23*, about a man who becomes obsessed with the way everything numerological in his life, like the number of letters in his name, seminal dates—and the sum of  $20 + 1 + 2$  in 2012—added up to 23. Coincidence?

Dylan and I wove our way through a panoply of Internet sites on 2012 and a pile of 2012 texts and articles, many of which he recommended to me. Meanwhile, I tried to fill him in on what I knew about the Maya calendar and cosmically provoked disasters.

After a year of correspondence I could see the spark of natural curiosity inherent in the now seventeen-year-old really catch fire. Dylan wrote me a neat little passage on his acquired view of skepticism. Skepticism is labeled by believers of bizarre theories as outright

rejection and arrogant self-appointment—“a buzzkill” as he put it. “But skeptics aren’t just stubborn people who don’t want to believe. Good skeptics want to listen. They just want evidence—and that’s where a lot of claims made by psychic prophets fall short.” Wise words from a man so young. “I wish I’d been exposed to critical thinking earlier in my life,” he added. Dylan was getting the picture. Real skepticism is about self-criticism, questioning, and the passionate search for evidence. Never be satisfied. Dylan’s words inspired me to share the skeptical view with a wider audience.

As the fateful day draws nearer I continue to receive more e-mails and I feel duty-bound to field more questions about the meaning of 2012 at lectures and conferences. The head of an Ask the Experts site based at the University of London’s Institute of Education asked me to do a little piece on calendar cycles and world ages to shed some light on what he called “the vexed question of December 2012. It keeps coming up in the schools we work with,” he said, and seems to be “surrounded by hype.” Could I “demystify” it?

Spurred on especially by my probing of books, articles, and Web-based material such as *Beyond 2012: Catastrophe or Ecstasy?*, thanks to Dylan and others, I began to understand the concern. Many prophecies are filled with frightening forecasts for the near future. To list just a few:

- The great Maya lord will make everything die.
- The world as we know it will come to an end.
- Damaging sunspots will reach their peak.
- The Cosmic Shaman of Galactic culture offers us clues for healing the planet which will be destroyed if we don’t act now.
- The solar system will enter an energetically hostile part of the galaxy.
- Mass extinction will take place.
- Yellowstone will explode.

- The earth's magnetic poles will reverse.
- We may get sucked into a black hole.

Dylan was right. These end-of-the-world scenarios *are* terrifying.

Now that you've read a page or two of this book, you are probably thinking that I am going to pooh-pooh all those doomsday predictions, playing the archetypal academic role of debunker. In every scientific controversy there is always an "expert" who bashes the outsiders, those unheralded independent thinkers who just might be glimpsing truths unrecognized by the haughty, exclusive establishment. I am not a dismissive academic. I always take my listeners and my readers seriously—I read what they write. When I wrote *Behind the Crystal Ball*, a book about the history of magic and occult beliefs, I interviewed astrologers, palm readers, and channelers. Rather than focusing on debunking non-mainstream beliefs, and well aware that many of these prognosticators truly believed in the doctrines they promoted, my interest lay in why people believed in magic and how occult beliefs changed with the times. My agnostic take on occult behavior netted me more than a few negative reviews.

I am interested in questions about ourselves, and I write when I think I have something to say about our culture that has not already been said. In the vast quantity of material on 2012 that I have studied since Dylan kick-started me on this project, I do not think the part of the story about *us* has really been articulated. Why has 2012 become such a big deal in contemporary mainstream culture? What is it about the ancient Maya and the end point of their calendar that makes so many of us take notice? Why are so many people today convinced the Maya message is meant for us? Do we have any clues to help us understand what the great cyclic turnover meant to them? What prophecies did it portend? These, in my opinion, are the most interesting questions to ask, and I think their answers can help us understand what lies behind the current Y12 mania.

In the next chapter, "What's in Store: A User's Guide to 2012 Maya Prophecies," I will survey the major works and the cast of char-

acters that have spurred most of the attention on the 2012 event. These include Jose Argüelles, who focused on calendar convergences in the premillennial 1980s. His “Harmonic Convergence,” the coming together of sub-cycles of the Mesoamerican calendar in 1987, was the warm-up act to 2012. We are at a point just twenty-six years short of a major galactic synchronization, he theorized. Either we shift gears right now or we will miss the opportunity. John Major Jenkins foresees a great galactic alignment attending 2012—the winter solstice sun crossing the center of the Milky Way. He believes that he has found evidence to support his theory that when the ancient Maya invented the Long Count 2,000 years ago, they deliberately geared it to this alignment. What is more, he implies, the great astronomical event will provide the signal that will usher in a new consciousness.

Whereas Argüelles and Jenkins base their scientific-sounding theories of time’s big overturn on astronomical and calendrical calculations, other sages, like Carl-Johan Calleman and Daniel Pinchbeck, claim to acquire their knowledge about Y12 via special insight—either by associating with Maya shamans or by becoming shamans themselves. These “adepts” contend that their personal odysseys and transformations have endowed them with special powers of insight into the meaning of the end of the Maya creation. Finally, synthesizers, such as Lawrence Joseph, draw from both the scientific and religious outlooks, arriving at a fear-wracked prognosis. They try to show (to quote one book jacket) “why the year 2012 will likely be more tumultuous, catastrophic, and quite possibly revelatory than any other year in human history. Nail biters beware . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Once I have laid out what the modern prophets say will happen in 2012, I will focus on the Maya themselves. In Chapter 3, “What We Know about the Maya and Their Ideas about Creation,” and Chapter 4, “The Calendar: Jewel of the Maya Crown,” I assess the evidence gathered by archaeologists, historians, and epigraphers (those who study Maya hieroglyphs) on the origins of Maya culture and the likely reasons behind the ascent of the Maya of Yucatan to the loftiest peaks of ancient cultural achievement.

We do not refer to the heyday of the Maya as the “Classic period” whimsically. They built great cities, erected colossal pyramids, and developed an advanced system of elaborate syllabic writing with more than a thousand hieroglyphic signs representing different sounds. They devised a system of timekeeping unparalleled in the Old World that included numeration by position and the concept of zero. In the field of astronomy they followed the movement of celestial bodies with uncanny accuracy, carefully tabulating cosmic cycles in painted documents called codices, made out of tree bark, and advertising them on massive stone monuments known as stelae. And they achieved it all with a minimum of technology. No wonder the Maya impress us. They are the Greeks and the Babylonians of the New World.

The Maya have captured our contemporary imagination like no other ancient culture since the Egyptians back in the 1920s, when archaeologists first breached the tomb of King Tutankhamen. From furniture design to women’s fashion, from hairdos to horror films, Egyptian relics—above all, their pyramids—evoked a sense of mystery about the past and the secrets it might yet hold. King Tut still draws crowds every time his sarcophagus goes on exhibit.

The Maya are today’s Egyptians of the New World as well. Ever since outsiders first set foot in Yucatan nearly 200 years ago, we have thought of the pyramid builders who once lived there as the “mysterious Maya.” Enveloped in all the mystery—in ancient codices and carved stelae, as well as in the stories of creation told in the *Popol Vuh* and in the sacred Books of Chilam Balam—are the ideas we will need to confront and explore if we really want to understand what the Maya thought came before and would come after the present Long Count creation epoch.

Because astronomy emerges as one of the most important considerations in so many 2012 end-of-the-world scenarios, we will need to acquire a basic understanding of “The Astronomy behind the Current Maya Creation,” the title of Chapter 5. What exactly is the Milky Way and how does it appear to us in the sky? What exactly is the alignment that attracts so much attention? We

will also need to investigate sunspot cycles, magnetic field reversals, and the long-term astronomical cycle known as the precession of the equinoxes. All of these phenomena are alleged by one contemporary 2012 prophet or another to lie at the foundation of Maya apocalyptic predictions. If the Maya knew about these things, we must understand how these phenomena operate. I take particular interest in astronomical issues because I was trained in that field before I ever laid eyes on the Maya. Applied to Maya studies, archaeoastronomy (or cultural astronomy), a field I helped establish, examines the unwritten record in broken bits of Maya archaeological artifacts and standing structures as well as the written record and images in native texts. Its goal is to understand how the Maya used material media to express their knowledge of the sky. As we will discover, the cosmos really *did* play a huge role in shaping Maya thought and action.

In Chapter 6, “What Goes Around: Other Ends of Time,” we will learn that scenarios regarding “last things” around the world have a lot in common. In particular, I will trace the Western Judeo-Christian apocalyptic idea of time’s end, highlighted in controversial Biblical texts. We will follow different interpretations of the historical view of time, from the Gnostic philosophy of the early Christian era up to the doorstep of American culture, where it begins to combine with aspects of the mythic view. We will explore some of the tensions that accompany all big cyclic endings of time, including the *fin-de-siècle*, or end-of-century, events in our own Western calendar.

Anyone who browses the Web or the shelves of bookstores and libraries will discover that America has a particular fascination with Y12. Why is that? My closing Chapter 7, “Only in America,” links our contemporary world view with the evolution of thought about the end of the world. Here I will pick up the thread of apocalyptic thinking from the previous chapter and follow it from seventeenth-century Puritan New England through the occult fads of the mid-nineteenth century, the revolutionary 1960s, and the 1970s, when epigraphers cracked the code of the mysterious Maya glyphs. Only



then can we explore what really lies behind our love affair with the ancient Maya and the 2012 prophecy's grip on pop culture.

Peering into another culture's view of the world is a little bit like looking through a telescope. When I gaze at that far away Other beyond the glass, I might glimpse a different kind of mathematics, different writing, different astronomy, and different architecture, religion, philosophy, folkways and so on. The closer I look the better understanding I acquire of my own narrow, time-squeezed, contemporary way of comprehending the world around me. The more, too, do I realize that cultural differences can be vast. It is all too easy to yield to the temptation of garbing the Other in our own Western clothing. How many times have I heard the confession from my students that studying the Maya has impacted their lives? That is my goal in *The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012*: to understand what the ancient Maya really had to say about 2012.