

Separating fact from fiction when talking about 2012



DURING THE holidays, my 13-year-old son, Peter, and I saw the adventure movie "2012," based upon the prediction that the world is going to end on Dec. 21, 2012.

Peter, swayed by the enthusiastic reviews of friends, connived me into going with him. He's a huge fan of science fiction and action films, the more violence, the better. But as we sat there watching the Washington Monument topple, Los Angeles' freeways collapse and houses on the coast slide into the Pacific, I saw my son become somber and dazed by the unfolding apocalypse.

The car ride home was quiet, until he asked, "Do you think the world will really end in December 2012?" I suddenly realized that I was no longer dealing with science fiction but with a very serious question about life and death. I had to choose carefully the direction I took in answering it.

Today's youngsters live in a world of increasing terrorism, global warming and prophecies of Armageddon. Unlike my generation, they have grown up with the Internet and possess a much broader knowledge base and intellectual curiosity because of it.

Their concerns about 2012 are fueled by the numerous blogs, Web sites and documentaries dedicated to apocalyptic destruction over the last few years. But sensationalism clouds the credibility of these

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sources, so youngsters need the adults who are closest to them to filter the information.

Since I am a historian, my natural inclination is to explain that the "doomsday" theory is based on the pre-Columbian Mayan calendar, which ends Dec. 21, 2012. The Maya made their prediction based on the cycles of the sun. Because they dated the start of their civilization to 3113 B.C., the Maya believed that one cycle would be completed 5,125 years into the future. On that date, the Earth will change its polarity and its inhabitants will experience a positive physical or spiritual transformation.

However, academic researchers aren't convinced that the Maya equated such a transformation with the apocalypse. Another possible explanation for Doomsday can be traced to Scripture and prophecy. The medieval predictions of Merlin, the Book of Revelation and the Chinese oracle of the I Ching all point to Dec. 21, 2012 as the end of civilization. But none of these is indisputable. In fact, Nostradamus, a 16th-century prophet, predicted that the apocalypse would occur in July 1999, and that never came to pass.

Yet another explanation is based on warnings from climate experts and other envi-

ronmental scientists that Earth is approaching a "tipping point" that will generate mass extinctions of species. But no less an authority than the National Aeronautics and Space Administration refutes that theory on a Web site specifically designed for that purpose.

While none of these theories is foolproof, they don't lessen the anxiety my son or any other youngster might feel. So what did I tell Peter?

I acknowledged his concern and shared my own fears about the end of the world. At the same time, I admitted that many of my fears are unrealistic and the result of rumor and anxiety.

Then I explained that the Earth is 4 billion years old, and still exists. Natural disasters have devastated our planet throughout history. In recent years we've seen just about everything - hurricanes, tornadoes, typhoons, earthquakes and floods - but civilization has survived them all.

Finally, I reminded Peter that the present - not the future or the past - is most precious. That we can't waste time thinking about "what might have been" or "what will come to be." If we spend the present caring for others and making the world a better place to live, then we will have fulfilled our purpose on this Earth and be reunited with loved ones when our time on it has ended.

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THE TIMES LEADER

TUESDAY, JANUARY 19, 2010 PAGE 9A