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The End Of The World As We Know It?

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by Richard Lacayo

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Party's over, oops! Out of time! –From 1999, by the Millennial Prophet Formerly Known as Prince

To understand what it means to make your home truly millennium ready, you have to visit the Eckharts of rural Lisbon, Ohio. Bruce Eckhart, 44, an automation technician for Daimler-Chrysler, his wife Diane, 41, and their 11-year-old daughter Danielle are models of apocalyptic pluck. It's not just the gas-powered home generator they bought in case of massive power outages. It's not the year's supply of dehydrated food in their basement or their stockpiles of canned chicken chow mein. It's the water bed. The collapse of public utilities is one of the big worries among the Y2K-anxious—meaning people concerned about the breakdown of everything because of the millennium bug that could lead to serious computer malfunction in the year 2000. (More on that later.) So the Eckharts bought Danielle a water bed. That way, in a pinch, they have an extra 300 gallons on hand. Danielle is a little nonplussed. "I hope we don't end up drinking my bed," she says.

Diane, whose energy and good humor are infectious, thinks planning for the millennium has been a family blessing. "We used to fight like cats and dogs, but this has brought us closer together. We have a common goal." The goal is facing off disaster. The Eckharts first got wind of potential Y2K trouble a few years ago when they came across newspaper articles mentioning the computer glitch that led them to the Internet, which—surprise!—is full of alarming Y2K websites. That's when Bruce concluded that "there are not enough people on the planet who can fix this problem in time."

By the summer of 1997, the Eckharts were storing away food. "I know I don't have to fear the future," says Diane. "I only worry about people who aren't prepared." In case the unprepared come rampaging on their property after disaster hits, the Eckharts have also laid in two rifles, a shotgun and a handgun. And Diane is teaching herself rudimentary dentistry and field medicine. "I want to be able to stitch a wound and fill a cavity," she says.

From time to time, Bruce runs his family through surprise drills, shutting off the power, announcing, "Y2K's here!" Then he fires up the generator to see how many household appliances it can handle. "We've learned we can run either the coffee machine or the refrigerator, but not both at the same time," he says. "And there will be no hair crimping during Y2K," Diane reminds Danielle. "I'm not going to burn up the generator so you can crimp your hair."

On the school bus, Danielle explains to other kids the range of potential Y2K problems. (The one they like hearing about the most is the collapse of the school system, the IRS of childhood.) But her parents have had trouble winning over community leaders. When Diane asked to address the local Girl Scout troop, she was turned down by a scout leader who was worried that Diane would alarm the girls. "Scouts prepare for emergencies lasting 72 hours," says Diane. "We just want to extend that to six months." And if the year 2000 arrives and civilization doesn't fall to pieces? She laughs. "I don't have to buy groceries for a long time."

To begin with, it's based on a misunderstanding. Whenever the millennium is, it's not really next year, even if that's when just about everybody will be marking it. The party crowd pounding back beers in Times Square, the doomsayers bunched in armored yurts, all of them will greet the millennium at the stroke of midnight on Dec. 31. But by more careful calculations, the millennium began a few years ago. A large part of the misunderstanding stems from Dionysius Exiguus—Latin for "Dennis the Short"—a 6th century monk who should be thought of as the original millennium bug. Dennis laid down the basis for the calendars we use today by figuring how far in the past Christ's birth was. As it turns out, he was off by several years. Historians now place the Nativity no later than 4 B.C., the year King Herod died. By that reckoning, the 3rd millennium would have commenced no later than 1997. You missed it.

All the same, the year just getting under way will bring 12 months of millennial thinking, hoping and, in many circles, worrying. Especially worrying—about The End of the World as We Know It (or TEOTWAWKI, the acronym in use on some Internet gloomsites). Apocalyptic fantasies, which have always been freely available in an atomic-age Christian culture, are about to reach another climax. Beyond the obvious reason that the year 2000 is at hand, there's the end of the cold war, which threatened for a while to deprive us of the sheer glamour of imagined annihilation. Even Hollywood has had to resort lately to wayward asteroids, space invaders and Godzilla as a way to provide that strangely agreeable image, civilization getting wrecked. "Yeah," we tell ourselves, as the space rock/laser beam/Japanese reptile whacks another ugly office building. "That should only happen to everything."

But as death-wish fantasies go, none of those is anywhere near as satisfying as our fading images of nuclear war, which had the great advantage of plausibility. By comparison, most religious versions of Armageddon (the biblical episode) seem as unreal as Armageddon (the sci-fi film). Even most devout Christians don't expect that any time soon they will see the seven-headed beast from The Revelation of St. John, the New Testament's dense and cryptic vision of the last things. But in these final days of the 20th century, religious millennialism has once again found a real world problem on which to hang its visions of doom—the Y2K (that's the year 2000) computer bug.

The Y2K problem is this. Many of the world's computers and microchip circuitry, the ones that run everything from cash machines and VCRs to interstate electric-power grids and intercontinental ballistic missiles, contain a programming oversight that makes them incapable of reading the date 2000. To represent years, computers generally use just the last two digits. When 1999—that's 99 in computer language—rolls over at midnight to 00, computers that have not had the glitch repaired will conclude that the date is 1900. That can lead to a surprising range of malfunctions, and not just in such obviously date-sensitive tasks as billing.

The problem is that there is no clear agreement, even among sober experts, of how bad the Y2K computer problem will be. Mike McClure, who is in charge of making sure that Georgia's electric-power giant Southern Co. is Y2K compliant, has the attitude of a lot of the techno-savvy elite. In safeguarding his personal affairs, McClure says he will be "very diligent" in keeping bank and stock records for the months prior to January 2000. He will file away his 401(k) statements and buy plenty of candles and water and withdraw several weeks' worth of cash. "But," he says, "I don't plan to buy a portable power generator. I don't think we're going to need it."

To the extent that there is some consensus among sensible experts, it is that the dire predictions of major social disruptions are way overblown. The most likely problems involve temporary glitches, especially overseas, in billing and invoice systems, that could cause some disruptions in business and government. The Internal Revenue Service, you will be relieved to know, promises to be prepared. (So it's true about death and taxes.) And the Social Security Administration, which sends out benefit checks, also says it's ready for 2000.

But that office began to comb through its computers in the 1980s. Not many agencies or businesses got that long a head start. So no one really knows how bad things will get until the witching hour arrives. The Pentagon insists that 95% of its "mission critical" computers will be fixed by June and all of them before Dec. 31. But nuclear weapons systems in all nations—including Russia, where the state of Y2K preparations is anybody's guess—are computer dependent. In November the British American Security Information

Council, a nuclear disarmament group, warned that a Y2K glitch could lead to erroneous early-warning reports or even trigger the accidental launch of a nuclear missile. Nuclear power plants could be vulnerable to the same difficulties. Last year, when the Nuclear Regulatory Commission looked at the Seabrook plant in New Hampshire, it found that Y2K problems, unless fixed, would affect the computers that monitored such crucial functions as reactor-coolant levels and fuel-handling systems.

“Nothing should be taken at face value when it comes to government assurances,” warns Dr. Mark Neuenschwander. He and his wife Betsy, also a physician, head the AD2000 Crisis Relief Task Force, a conservative Christian humanitarian effort based in Colorado Springs, Colo. Because of what he expects to be potential problems in anesthesia machines, intravenous pumps and ICU monitors—like many complex devices, they contain tiny “embedded” computer chips—he warns against elective surgery in the first six months of 2000. “Health care will be the least prepared.”

It’s that kind of uncertainty that some religious millennialists are seizing upon, and in the process moving quickly from the plausible to the hyperbolic. In pulpits and on videotapes, on Christian radio stations and Internet websites, there are dedicated prophets of doom. They warn of a cascade of Y2K calamities—massive power blackouts, the failure of hospital, factory and fire equipment, the collapse of banking, food shortages, riots. A Y2K article posted last year on the website of the Christian Coalition speculated that President Clinton might use the chaos that Y2K unleashes as an opportunity to seize dictatorial powers. The televangelist Pat Robertson is marketing a video called *Preparing for the Millennium: A CBN News Special Report*, which summarizes both the Y2K problem and Robertson’s novel, *The End of an Age*, in which Armageddon is triggered by a meteor crash.

Then there’s the popular series of novels by retired minister Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, a former sportswriter. Set in the immediate future, their four “Left Behind” novels chronicle life on the eve of the Second Coming. Genuine Christians disappear to heaven. Everyone else is abandoned to suffer a terrible earthquake, wars and the whims of the Antichrist, a.k.a. U.N. Secretary-General Nicolae Carpathia of Romania. Collectively the books have sold more than 3 million copies. LaHaye also offers maximalist warnings about Y2K. It “very well could trigger a financial meltdown,” he warned recently in an online- chat event, “leading to an international depression, which would make it possible for the Antichrist or his emissaries to establish a one-world currency or a one-world economic system, which will dominate the world commercially until it is destroyed.”

A cybermogul resembling Bill Gates figures as something like the Antichrist in *Judgment Day 2000* by Richard Wiles, in which the breakdown of all computers leaves America vulnerable to terrorists with nuclear bombs in suitcases and a leftover Soviet doomsday

machine called the Dead Hand. Wiles, 45, a onetime marketing director for Christian Broadcasting Network, believes God directed him to write his book. "In 12 months we'll know if I'm right," says Wiles. "If I'm wrong, the worst that will happen to me is I'll be tremendously embarrassed. If other people are wrong and don't listen to me, the worst that will happen is all men will perish."

This, the alarmists insist, is in fulfillment of the New Testament prophecy of the troubles that will precede Christ's Second Coming. In the Gospel of Luke, Christ warns that "nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and great earthquakes shall be in diverse places, and famines, and pestilences, and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from heaven." In Matthew, Jesus says that when the time for his return is near, the signs will be unmistakable and the faithful will be alerted by the trumpet call of angels.

Among the Y2K-worried there are also more secular survivalists, believers in the worst-case scenarios who, while they may be Christians too, don't know or care whether the chaos they foresee is any part of God's plan. They are just sure something bad is coming. One of the best known is Ed Yourdon, a computer theorist whose book *Time Bomb 2000* is in its 12th printing. Yourdon and his wife are moving from Manhattan to an adobe house near Taos, N.M., that has solar panels and soon a windmill to provide power. "There are so many things that can go wrong in Manhattan," he says. "[In Taos] I can control my environment." Near Boulder, Colo., Paloma O'Riley, an ex-Navy computer security specialist, has helped organize more than 200 groups nationwide through her Cassandra Project, an online Y2K advice network that gets half a million hits a month at its website. "Everybody's coming to this [problem] late," she says. "Most 'contingency plans' were written 10 years ago and put on a shelf."

In the coming year, as Y2K becomes a more familiar problem, the ranks of secular Y2K survivalists may grow. But most early "roosters"—people who see apocalypse on the millennial horizon—came to their conclusions through a prism of religious belief. Though millennialism hinges upon the notion of Christ's return, there are pockets of religious Year 2000 cultism even in nations that are mostly non-Christian. Chen Tao, for instance, is a Taiwan-based group of cultists whose beliefs combine ufo lore with rough-and-ready bits of Christianity. In 1997 a group of them settled in Garland, Texas, to await the end, dressed in white outfits, including white cowboy hats. "What all these movements have in common is the belief that the world is on its last legs," says Marina Benjamin, author of *Living at the End of the World*. "It's crumbling, demonic, demented."

So much the better that the Y2K bug is something akin to the original sin of technological society, a mortal flaw bred in the very bones of the modern world. And that the proposed solution is a head-for-the-hills survivalism that speaks nicely to the enduring American

fascination with ingenuity and self-reliance. And as it has for decades, the prospect of apocalypse now also offers the promise of escape to millions of people alienated from a civilization of intimidating global corporations, boundless personal gratification and unnerving manipulations of nature, like cloning.

History, of course, is littered with premature prophets of doom. One of America's largest millennial movements was led by William Miller, a 19th century farmer. On Oct. 22, 1844, many of his 50,000 followers took to the hilltops, waiting in vain for the appearance of Christ and an army of angels. By the latter half of that century, two end-time views had become dominant among Protestant groups. "Pre-millennialism" imagined Christ appearing on earth during the reign of the Antichrist. "Post-millennialism" taught that Christ would return only after Christians had first established their own thousand-year reign of righteousness. And a more recent splinter of post-millennialism is "Reconstructionism," founded by Rousas John Rushdoony. It holds that before Christ will return to earth, society must collapse and then be rebuilt along more godly lines.

One prominent Reconstructionist is Gary North, Rushdoony's son-in-law and head of his own Institute for Christian Economics. "Scary Gary's" website is by far one of the most popular Y2K panic centers. "In all of man's history," he has warned, "we have never been able to predict with such accuracy a worldwide disaster of this magnitude. The millennium clock keeps ticking. There is nothing we can do." But he has a few recommendations anyhow: buy gold and grain; quit your job; and find a remote cabin safe from the rioting hordes. He also recommends a two-year subscription (price: \$225) to his newsletter, Remnant Review, an offer that appears to reflect a faith that, if nothing else, the mail will keep operating through 2000. As a subscriber incentive he promises "my report on 15 stocks which stand to benefit from this crisis."

North, who declines to be interviewed, not only hopes that America will fall; he believes it's part of his duty to bring it down, to be replaced by a Bible-based Reconstructionist state that will impose the death penalty on blasphemers, heretics, adulterers, gay men and women who have had abortions or sex before marriage. So it's a fine line for him between warning against a calamity and encouraging panic.

There are less thunderous approaches to the problem too. Karen Anderson of Dallas is a onetime family therapist and marketing consultant (for North, among others). Now she's a self-proclaimed homemaker's guide to apocalypse preparedness. She has a new book, Y2K for Women: How to Protect Your Home and Family in the Coming Crisis; a six-part audiotope series; and, of course, a website where she offers tips on things like how to find reusable menstrual cups. Her stated goal is to appear on Oprah.

Anderson thinks North's scare tactics are counterproductive for most women. "It's so intense," she says. "Women go, 'I can't deal with this!'" And so Anderson is part of a yuppie-ish Y2K-readiness group that meets once a month to discuss risks and learn self-reliance skills. The four couples who take part are learning how to roll their own oats for cereal, shop for paraffin lamps—those don't give off smoke—and preserve fruit. French coffee presses, they have discovered, are perfect for sprouting seeds. If Martha Stewart ran a survivalist sect, it might be something like this.

Then there's Harrison, Ark., a quiet Ozarks farm town (pop. 11,611) that is becoming a mecca for anyone who fears the worst from the computer bug. Up to 100 local citizens there attend twice-monthly meetings of a group called Y2K Watch. And in August, a Y2K town meeting brought at least 700 people to an auditorium at North Arkansas College. "My purpose was not to scare anyone but to begin talking about economic self-sufficiency," says former mayor Dan Harness, who organized the gathering, which had representatives from a local utility, a bank, hospital and phone company.

Two years ago, concerns about Y2K helped persuade Jerry and Carolyn Head to move from a suburb of Dallas to an 85-acre farm near Harrison. The Heads don't think of themselves as survivalists. "Most of them are nuts," says Jerry, 51. "We're planners," explains Carolyn, 52, a teacher who homeschools daughter Sarah, 17, and son David, 14. (Their son Lesley, 23, also lives at home.) For them, planning has meant buying a home generator, a 1,000-gal. propane tank and a small flock of chickens. The Heads expect cash to be useless for a while after Y2K sets in. So stashed throughout their four-bedroom house are hundreds of rolls of toilet paper. "These are good barter items," Jerry explains.

The worry in some parts of Washington is that even if most Y2K problems are ironed out, pre-2000 panic could have a real impact. If people are worried about the stability of the economy, they might pull their money out of the stock market, which, if nothing else, would cause real dips in the market. Bank runs stoked by fear could be as bad as actual computer-generated bank problems, says Senator Robert Bennett, the Utah Republican who heads the Senate's Year 2000 committee. As a precaution, the Federal Reserve plans to print an extra \$50 billion to \$75 billion worth of bank notes this year.

There are already small signs of alarm. Preparedness Resources Inc. is a 20-year-old Utah purveyor of dehydrated foods. The typical order of one year's "nutritionally balanced" supply of grains, vegetables, fruit, milk, meat substitutes and cooking aids sells for \$1,495 plus shipping. Until about 1995, the company did most of its business with Mormons, who stockpile food as a principle of their faith. More recently, however, as much as 90% of sales have been to non-Mormons. "Y2K is driving the worry," says office manager Roslyn Niebuhr. Because monthly sales have zoomed from \$300,000 in December 1977 to \$4 million last November, the company has quadrupled its dealerships to 100.

Since the end of the world prompts thoughts about escape to the ends of the earth, rural real estate development is another promising end-time business. In Colorado's San Luis Valley, a onetime physicist and computer programmer named Milt Trosper is fashioning High Valley Cyber Development, a would-be millennium-insulated community on a high plateau surrounded by mountains. "'Safe haven' is the buzzword," says Trosper. "People want to move here from Chicago, Florida, Ohio." If he can get \$50 million in financing, he hopes to accommodate the nervous newcomers with a "smart" community of PC-operated, solar-heated homes.

The proliferation of millennial doomsayers leaves mainstream denominations uneasy. The expectation of Christ's return is a fundamental tenet of Christian faith, so Pope John Paul II has been talking up the millennium for years—but as an opportunity for spiritual renewal, not as the estimated time of arrival for Christ's Second Coming. Many churches are worried that false predictions of the Second Coming will undermine the authority of biblical teachings generally. In October, bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America issued a pastoral letter to their 5 million members, dismissing "wild prophecies" and declaring that the third Christian millennium should be welcomed with hope.

The Y2K alarmists have no such concerns about how their post-millennium credibility will stand. The impulse to find signs of the Second Coming and all its attendant disasters is a durable one. It can thrive in the face of continuing disappointments. All the same, in the probable event that the world does not come undone next year, academics like Richard Landes, director of Boston University's Center for Millennial Studies, expect that alarmists "will be totally discredited. Millennialism will fade rapidly." His group has a theme chosen for the 2002 edition of the International Conference on Millennialism: "Millennial Disappointment."

Good title. Apocalyptic imaginings are fun, but they're wishful thinking. It's more likely that the world will just churn on as it is. Or as R.E.M., another set of millennium prophets, once put it:

It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.

—Reported by John Cloud and Emily Mitchell/New York, Wendy Cole/Lisbon, Declan McCullagh/Washington, Timothy Roche/Dallas and Richard Woodbury/Taos

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